ON THE SUBJECT OF PLAY:

DIGITAL GAME-PLAY AS MODELS OF IDEOLOGIES

L.A.W.J. DE WILDT / 0615196

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SUPERVISOR: PROF. DR. F.W.A. KORSTEN
(LEIDEN UNIVERSITY / ERASMUS UNIVERSITY ROTTERDAM)

SECOND READER: DR. RENÉ GLAS
(UTRECHT UNIVERSITY)

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ABSTRACT

Digital games provide a fruitful comparison to ideologies because they resemble ideologies as an organizing structure entered into and because they serve as a systematic test case for alternatively organized (ideological) worlds. They do so perhaps more so than linear narrative media, as game-play presents both fictional worlds, systems and a spect-actor present as participatory agent.

By addressing the structural parallels between ideology and digital games as organizations of quasi-natural conventions, I argue in this thesis that games have the capacity to model, propose and reflect on ideologies. Comparing roughly twenty years of scholarship on ideological play, ludology, narratology, game design, proceduralism and play-centred studies, I argue that games dynamically present stylized simulations of a possible world, occurring to the subject of play in a here-and-now that at once grants autonomy while doing so in a paradoxically rigid structure of affordances, constraints and desires.

That subject of play, meanwhile, is split between played subject (the presented avatar and the game's content), the playing subject as demanded by the ludic power structure of rules and the interpreting subject that is tasked to understand and inform the process of game-play.

Through close analyses of *Cart Life*, *the Stanley Parable* and *Spec Ops: the Line* I argue for game-play as a dialectical process, past academic scholarship that posits either games as procedural systems of interpellation or play as mythical unrestrained creativity. An understanding of game-play as dialectical process akin to the relation between subjects and ideological power structures furthermore demands a recognition of the critical potential of game-play. Through theatrical techniques of enstrangement, game-play may reveal uncritical familiarity with the quasi-natural conventions of ideology – be they generic, social or political.

KEYWORDS

Digital games, ideology criticism, game-play dialectic, enstrangement, split subjectivity

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On that note, I have profited immensely from the exchange of knowledge possible between Dutch universities. As a research master student at the Cultural Analysis-orientated department of Literary Studies in Leiden, I was nonetheless able to profit from other, differently Media-orientated departments and courses at the University of Amsterdam, the Research School for Media Studies (RMeS) and the Media and Culture Studies department at the University of Utrecht.

Notably, I have been able to benefit from the excellent guidance offered to me in two courses at the University of Utrecht: Rules of Play and Media & Performance Theory. I am thankful to René Glas for allowing me to struggle with Sicart's play-centred approach to game studies, taking me beyond a proceduralist paradigm; and to Joost Raessens and Chiel Kattenbelt. The case study of *Spec Ops* in relation to Brechtian *Lehrstücke* was first developed in an early stage under their guidance, and parts of that paper find their way into this thesis. I am very grateful to them for their feedback and theoretical background, which gave me the confidence to pursue this grander, overlapping project. Beyond that, work in progress was presented at the 60st anniversary conference for the European Association for American Studies under the title "Participation, Conflict and War," where I presented a formalist reading of the way in which games may function as ideological propaganda. I would like to thank the audience present there, specifically Matthew Wall (University College Dublin), for their helpful questions and criticism.

DECLARATION

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0. INTRODUCTION

"Area 1

Hi-Score 00020000

Score 00000000

Rest 02 "

– Cinematic opening (*Contra: Operation C*, Konami, 1991)

"I will always place the mission first.

I will never accept defeat.

I will never quit.

[…]

Click below to learn more about Army Values and careers in the U.S. Army."

– Soldier's Creed (*America's Army* website, U.S. Army, 2014)

Back when I first joined the army, things were decidedly 8-bit. I was playing the *Contra* series' *Operation C* (Konami, 1991) on the Game Boy in 1994, and I was absolutely fascinated by the idea of simulating soldierhood. Years later, I considered myself – by digital standards – a war-hardened veteran. Playing *Metal Gear Solid 2* (Konami, 2002) almost a decade after *Contra*, digital war and I had further grown up together. Graphically, games had certainly improved. Narratively, structurally and critically, as well. *Contra*'s premise was trivial, arbitrary: the Japanese version had Bill fighting an unnamed hostile nation; the American version staged Lance fighting aliens. Either way, it did not affect playing the game much.

On the contrary, *Metal Gear Solid 2* affected *me*: after years of perfecting my aim, reflexes and tactical thinking; a game offered reflection. The game addressed me, personally, apart from Raiden (the protagonist I was controlling) and asked me what I was doing. Game scholar Tanner Higgin argues that through these comments on the act of play – "Turn the game console off right now! […] You'll ruin your eyes playing so close to the TV!" – *MGS2* "hails the player as the embodied gamer" behind the screen (2010, 261). It certainly was not the first game to break the fourth wall: its direct predecessor did it and, at least as early as 1994, *Taz in Escape from Mars*' eponymous protagonist had looked at me impatiently through the screen after I had paused the game (HeadGames, 1994).[1]

[1] Janet Murray had the same experience as I did, describing the restless Tazmanian devil as he "glares out from the screen and begins to tap his foot and wave impatiently," causing her to state that "it is almost as if the programmer within the system is waving at us, but doing so in a manner that deepens rather than disrupts the

However, what *Metal Gear Solid 2* did to surprise me and many others, was address the ideological content of its kind.

Still in *MGS2*, the previous game's protagonist, Solid Snake, appears and tells the player that the illusion of virtual training acts "to remove you from the fear that goes with battle situations," causing Snake to openly wonder about "war as a video game—what better way to raise the ultimate soldier?" (Konami, 2002). As if to prove the point, a month later, in that same year on the fourth of July, the American army released *America's Army* (United States Army, 2002), a promotional game for the United States' armed forces – at once both didactic tool and recruitment platform.

Indeed it is this apparent capability of digital games to promote or address ideologies that brought about this thesis. As the digital game has grown up to join posters and cinema as recruitment propaganda;[2] it has also grown up to join literature and other media to show counterhegemonic potential.[3] The comparisons are only justified to an extent: roughly twenty years of digital game scholarship is, in itself, more than an indication of the need and possibility to address this type of artefact in its own terms. As perhaps the dominant medium of the early 21st century, its critical potential could be aimed at a diverse audience of around 1.55 billion (de Heij et al., 2013), and is increasingly becoming a popular medium alongside traditional preoccupations of ideology criticism: literature, film and television (Diele, 2013).

It is for the above reasons that my thesis is primarily concerned inquiring:

How can digital game-play serve to model, propose and reflect on ideologies?

In other words, I ask how digital games may formally show the capability to address ideology, either by confirming or contesting hegemony. Three elements of this question's formulation can be dealt with largely within this introduction: digitality, game-play and a concept of ideology. I argue that they belong strictly to my thesis' methodology: the *logos* [account] of or on a pursuit of knowledge [*methodos*] or *meta-hodos* – an expression of the development of such a way or 'journey'. The first element of the question (i.e. "digital") defines its scope. The second ("game-play") places it within an important nexus of game studies (namely the interrelation between game and play) and leads me to state my theoretical framework. The latter ("ideologies") is a central concept necessary to the

immersive world" due to its suggestion of the character's eagerness for the player to continue the paused game (1997, 105).

[2] Beside *America's Army* stand such examples as the Chinese People's Liberation Army's *Glorious Mission* (Giant Interactive Group, 2011), the Palestinian *Under Ash* and *Under Siege* (Afkar Media, 2001; 2005) and Hezbollah's *Special Force* series (Central Internet Bureau, 2003; 2007).

[3] To stick with my earlier example, Higgin argues that *Metal Gear Solid 2* "offers a critical rather than celebratory perspective on the military-entertainment complex" through its critique of war as "a regime of biopower" (Hardt & Negri, 2004, qtd. in Higgin, 2010, 262)

questions treated. After I provide an introduction of the structure of this thesis, I will depart from the formulation of the research question and its subquestions, then, onto an articulation of each of the terms above in order to articulate my methodology.

First, I will propose a method by which I hope to answer my research question through its three consequent subquestions – each of which informs its own chapter.

Second, as a first part of my methodology, I will delineate the scope of this thesis as one confined to *digital* gameplay and the consequences thereof as opposed to considering a broader tradition of play and scholarship on it. My focus furthermore tends primarily (but not exclusively) toward narrative, singleplayer game-play, the shortcomings of which I will reflect on in my conclusion.

Third, this focus on game-play brings my thesis' argument close to a methodological tension within contemporary game scholarship: the tension between game and play. On one hand, game scholarship knows a myriad of Humanities-inspired attempts at reading games as understandable objects with meanings, rhetorics or representations that are considered apart from players (Mäyrä, 2008, 157). These players are arguably, as a consequence, rendered merely instrumental to a game's meaning. On the other hand, a branch of game studies similar to sociological, anthropological and philosophical occupations focuses on players and game cultures as their predominant interest (156). Indeed, it takes players as the main agent in phenomena of play wherein games exist necessarily through players and are reflexively created by them. In a need to position myself within this implicit methodological tension I will clarify my position as a scholar through a recent debate on the relation between game and play. From that, I will attempt to work from a dialectical principle of game-play that prefers none above the other, instead recognizing the mutual interdependence of these overlapping concepts.

Finally, I will need to provide a working definition of ideology as a starting point for further inquiry. I call this a *working* definition because I will work with it: it is informed by and informs, in turn, my reflection on digital games, working through and with them to answer my questions. Quite simply: how can I otherwise go on to say that digital game-play resembles or serves ideology; or vice versa? I need to account for my use of this concept not merely because it is central to this thesis, but because of its slippery nature and loaded academic history. Rather than aspiring to a definition fully justified or developed with reference to the history of ideology criticism, I dedicate myself to a definition that I take to be sufficiently explicit for readers to criticize or further develop. In other words, I *work* with it in a strictly functional sense; but I also invite criticism on my thesis by accounting for my use of this concept, which is a concept I deem particularly problematic to pin down or literally come to terms with.

Before I relate my methodology, a brief note on method – again: an expression of the development of my 'way' or journey. In order to answer my research question, through which I

hypothesize affirmatively that digital game-play has the ability to model, propose and reflect on ideologies, I must ask three subquestions.

In my first chapter, I pose the question of how game design, through the formal characteristics of the game, may be capable of proposing a model of a world in a way that is ideological. Following my proposed definition of ideology (as an organization of 'world' that shapes affordances, constraints and desires through conventions), I ask: how or in what way do digital games propose a model of a world in the first place? How can we understand formal characteristics of game design ideologically? And how does such a set of formal design characteristics intervene in ideological conventions?

Regarding games in isolation is a consciously incomplete, and artificial, perspective. My second chapter moves further toward my dialectical reading of game-play by focusing on the player as subject. In this chapter I ask what type of subject is constructed through the structures of digital game-play. Building on the first chapter, I argue for games as subjectivizing structures, while carefully problematizing earlier theories on the subject of game-play. On the basis of these, I work through paradoxical accounts of the player as somehow immersed or present in the fictional context described in the first chapter while, at the same time, often being regarded as an interpreting, deconstructing agent outside of that fictional context.

In my final chapter, I build on the governing structures and subject positions of game-play as necessarily intertwined. I ask how the dialectical relationship between the game as ideological structure and the player as split subject may provoke a reflection on ideologies. In other words, my question here is: how may game-play through reflection lay bare the ideological conventions taken for granted as natural?

That being said, the order of the chapters and of the very concept in development ('game-play') may invite certain criticism regarding some implied preference of game over play. Do I think the player as merely instrumental to the game? Or, conversely: is the game merely an interchangeable tool or expression of the activity of play? Both sound extremely untenable; and neither is my position. The word game-play stems from its historical use as "the action or process of playing a game or games," predating the digital game by some decennia (circa 1920); and having been recorded in the context of digital games in at least *Which Micro?* magazine and *Ace* as early as 1984 and 1991 ("gameplay, n." *OED Online*, 2014). I will work through my non-hierarchical concept of the game-play dialectic in my methodology and the chapters below. My first chapter indicates the necessity of the interacting player in the process of actualizing the game's content. My second chapter indicates the nature of the player as a subject that both configures and interprets the game through its mediatized presence. My third chapter argues how game and play may contradict and lay bare the generic tropes of ideology, by enstranging the split subject – by making it strange, akin to German *Verfremdung* or Russian *ostranenie*.

I should proceed to explain my use of this term here in order to prevent confusion throughout the rest of this thesis. Enstrangement is a neologism introduced into English by Benjamin Sher to translate Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky's term *ostranenie* (1990). I employ this term as a translation of both Shklovsky's *ostranenie* and playwright Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdung*, for three reasons: its accuracy as a neologism, the historical connection between the two terms and their overlapping conceptual traditions.

As Sher argues, *ostranenie*'s o- prefix is "used to implement an action," and applies to two stems: *stran* (strange) and an inflection of *storon* (side) as in *otstranit'* [to remove, to shove aside] (1990, xix). As a result, he proposes that Shklovsky's *ostranenie* is "a process or act that endows an object or image with 'strangeness' by 'removing' it from the network of conventional, formulaic, stereotypical perceptions and linguistic expressions (based on such perceptions)" (ibid.). "Estrangement", according to him, is both a negative and limited translation, "making it strange" is too positive: both are not neologisms. Instead, "they exemplify the very defect they were supposed to discourage" (ibid.). 'Defamiliarization' is another common translation that is rather a "transition from the 'familiar' to the 'unknown,'" whereas *ostranenie* is rather a process from the cognitively known to the familiarly known, to "knowledge that expands and complicates our perceptual process in the rich use of metaphors, similes and a host of other figures of speech" (ibid.). Enstrangement is, like *ostranenie*, a neologism that counterpoints estrangement, with the use of which I follow Sher's.

My use of enstrangement furthermore serves as an English cognate to Brecht's *Verfremdung*. Literary theorist and translation scholar Douglas Robinson traces Shklovsky's Russian term via Sergei Tretiakov to Brecht (2008). Shklovsky indeed confirms as much in a 1964 interview and further anecdotal evidence leads Robinson to argue for at least a common genealogy that differentiates the two terms (*ostranenie*/*Verfremdung*) from *otchuzhdenie*/*Entfremdung*: alienation (171) – or, as Sher translates it: estrangement. Use of the neologism *Verfremdung* functions, as with *ostranenie* and *enstrangement* to differentiate it from similar words: *entfremden* [estrange] and *befremden* [alienate].

I use the English enstrangement, then, as different from the broader denotations of estranging and alienating. I do so in order to stress the historical and conceptual similarities between *ostranenie* and *Verfremdung* as neologisms denoting a 'making strange' that functions to re-familiarize knowledge taken for granted. The idea of enstrangement is that one can be made re-aware of (cognitively) familiar circumstances and objects by presenting them in a new (or 'strange') fashion (Shklovsky, 1929, 6). Hence, a convention so familiar so as to appear natural may be enstranged to draw attention to it. I will return to the term below, but it should suffice to state for now that I refer with enstrangement to both *ostranenie* and *Verfremdung* as a preferred translation of either.

0.1. METHODOLOGY: SCOPE

When I confine my scope to *digital* game-play, that does not mean that I disregard scholarship regarding non-digital play. It would be problematic, however, to include considerations of 'analogue' play for a couple of reasons. First, play loses some of its reflexive capabilities when digitized. As anthropologist Thomas Malaby argues, a game is processual, in that while it is played "it always contains the potential for generating new practices and new meanings, possibly refiguring the game itself" (2007, 102). In that sense, playing games is essentially a reflexive activity: game-playing takes account of its own rules resulting in the potential to change games *through* play. A familiar example might be children's renegotiation of rules while playing. For instance, losing a particularly valuable marble in an improvised play setting, a childhood friend once decided suddenly that the marble could only truly be won if the act in question was performed successfully *three times in a row*. Later, this became six times. Malaby's example plays out on a more professional level, relating how American football's 'tuck rule' was changed after a particularly controversial match in which the strict interpretation of officials was changed reflexively due to its discrepancy to "most spectators' sense that the play should have been a fumble" (103). While this reflexive capability of game-play is relevant, then, from child's play to professional football, it is not so fundamental to digital play. I would not argue that the rules of a computer-directed game are unchangeably set in stone – but rather in the medium of code, which is (in principle) reprogrammable. But that action of reprogramming rules is not only particularly inaccessible to most users, it also takes place outside of the game and outside of play. In the case of digital game-play then, play loses most of its reflexive nature to the extent that rules are hardly negotiable.

Aside from the reflexive nature of playing games, digital games add something else that needs to be taken into account: the ability to present fictional worlds in which players may feel perceptually or mentally present. This is not to say that football has no distinct system of symbolic representation that is at least slightly akin to fictional worlds. Clothing, surroundings and so on present conventions that have specific meaning within the world of a football match. Board games, too, such as *Axis & Allies* (Harris, 1984), *Monopoly* (Darrow, 1935) or *Train* (Louise-Romero, 2009) employ a range of visual and procedural (i.e. process- or rule-based) representations that affect game-play. *Train* is perhaps most well-known for its representation: at the level of rules, players compete to fill their trains with people in an efficient way in order to be the first to reach the goal. But only when the goal is revealed in its "anagnorisis" to 'be' (i.e. to represent) a Nazi concentration camp is the game fundamentally changed (Ferrari, 2011, 149). Players suddenly refuse the game, demand a change of rules, cry or are otherwise affected by its representation as thematically framing their actions within the systematic genocide of 20th century German National Socialism (Logas, 2011, 2). Close as these counter-examples may come, I argue that both board games and embodied sports differ to a significant

extent from digital games' ability to render a dynamic fictional world, presented by the algorithmic complexity of the computer processor.

I have further focused my thesis' subject matter to a constrained corpus of games within digital game-play: that of the singleplayer game with narrative elements. The former is due to issues mostly of time, practical scope and expertise. Considering the interplay between players in a (massively) multiplayer environment necessitates a prolonged period of embedded research, as shown by the research of Taylor (2006), Glas (2012) and others, that is difficult to undertake within the time available to write a master thesis. In terms of practical scope, it requires a range of observation and reflection that would significantly add to the size of the current inquiry, which is restrained to around 30,000 words. Nonetheless it is a particularly interesting avenue of further research into games as test sites for (hegemonic, alternative or conceptual) ideologies, and as such it is an avenue that I must reflect on in my conclusion. Furthermore, such an ambitious project would require expertise that I do not currently possess: particularly because online research regarding the interplay of various human players requires some basis in the methods, theories and concepts of the social sciences.

The case of narrative elements is, finally, a case that seems as much inevitable as it is coincidental. Despite long-standing debate over whether digital games may or may not be akin to narratives, most games do inevitably seem to contain narrative elements.[4] I mean elements of storytelling, here, that players cannot influence, such as the background story of avatars, actions by (temporarily) uncontrolled objects or characters or the premises and context within which the game is framed. However, it is true that games do not *necessarily* contain narrative elements: an example of which would be *Tetris* (Pajitnov, 1984), attempts to which to assign narrative or ideological meaning have been controversial.[5]

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[4] This was the main source of disagreement within a long-winding debate over the course of some years (roughly 1997-2007) that is habitually referred to as the 'ludology-narratology' debate. While ludology was proposed as a name for a (then hypothetical) "discipline that studies game and play activities" (Frasca, 1999), it was quickly played out as threatened by "colonising attempts" from fields traditionally dealing with narrative (Aarseth, 2001; Eskelinen 2001). The debate gradually dissolved as the debate appeared to be fueled mainly by "misunderstandings [and] inaccurate beliefs" (Frasca, 2003b, 92). While accused 'narratologists' observed that the theoretical construct of narratology was rather "a phantom of their [ludologists'] own creation" (Murray, 2005). Ironically, media scholar Jan Simons finally argued that "some games studies scholars feel urged to demonstrate that games are not narratives" while their arguments were "mainly derived from narrative theory itself" (2007) – ironic because indeed, already in 1999, the "goal" of Gonzalo Frasca's definition and statement of ludology "was to show how basic concepts of ludology could be used *along with narratology* to better understand videogames" (1999, emphasis added).

[5] Janet Murray infamously assigned dramatic content to the abstract game *Tetris*, stating that "this game is a perfect enactment of the overtasked lives of Americans in the 1990s—of the constant bombardment of tasks that demand our attention and that we must somehow fit into our overcrowded schedues and claer off ourdesks in order to make room for the next onslaught" (Murray, 1997, 144). While Ian Bogost cautiously called it "Murray's unique and endearing experience of the game" (2006, 100), game scholar Markku Eskelinen ridiculed this reading, calling it a projection of "her favourite content on it," arguing that it is equally viable to read Chess

It is furthermore coincidental in that my core case studies appear at least partly dependent on narrative convention for their relation to ideology. These case studies, to be introduced in their relevant chapters, are *Cart Life* (Hofmeier, 2011), *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Café, 2013) and *Spec Ops: the Line* (Yager Development, 2012). I argue that the presence of narrative elements in each of these is representative of a norm that is broadly applicable to digital games throughout their history. This is true, for example, from their origin in *Spacewar!* (Russel, 1962) – the title of which may already be considered a (paratextual) narrative element. Quite simply, it frames the players' ships as being both at war and in space. A more recent (and multiplayer-online) example is *America's Army*, an early case study that was dropped due to issues of scope. Despite its multiplayer nature, it operates within the context of a War on Terror that finds expression through the narrative elements of missions, character models, focalisation (each team at the same time can only ever play American soldiers battling terrorists) and the elaborate paratextual premises of graphic novels, advertisement and the 'Real Heroes' program.[6]

Lastly, this thesis' scope is necessarily confined by perspective. This is the main reason my method entails writing in the first person – as opposed to using passive constructions or an assumed 'we' of myself and the reader, *any* reader, in some hypothetically homogenous academic community. Instead, I wish to make my position explicit as Lars de Wildt, an MA-student that vulnerably invites criticism to each argument, claim or observation made, rather than presuming an objective, unbiased or universal nature to these words. In an attempt to go beyond the limitations of my perspective, I will often resort to a study of receptions. Reviews, interviews and internetfora are filled with fellow players that confirm, expand or contradict my own observations and I have consulted them where possible and productive.

0.2. METHODOLOGY: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Generally speaking, when I talk about digital games I adhere to game scholar Jesper Juul's well-known definition of the classical game model:

> [1.] A game is a rule-based system [2.] with a variable and quantifiable outcome, [3.] where different outcomes are assigned different values, [4.] the player exerts effort in

as representing American society as signified by hierarchized racial struggle; a lack of health care for stricken pieces and so on (2001).

[6] The Real Heroes program is particularly interesting as it is intermedial 'proper' due to its incorporation of American soldiers into the game ("Real Heroes," n.d.), thereby connecting the narratives of their service in Iraq and Afghanistan to *America's Army*'s fictional narrative context of conflict in Czervenia and Ostregal ("story synopsis" 2014).

> order to influence the outcome, [5.] the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, [6.] and the consequences of the activity are negotiable. (Juul, 2005a, 36)

What makes this definition valuable is that it is based on a meta-study comparing and incorporating definitions from i.a. Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois, Bernard Suits, Brian Sutton-Smith, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman. It describes the properties of games as formal systems of rules and outcomes (which must be countable, and multiple, e.g. win/lose) that require player effort to influence those outcomes within the rules — features one, two and four. Along with player effort, the relation between the formal system and the player is defined as a valorisation of outcomes (e.g. that the winning outcome is more valuable than a losing one), that the player will attach some emotion to (i.e. by default, Juul assumes that players care about the game, otherwise they will not play) — features four, three and five of the definition, respectively. Finally, Juul argues that games' consequences are negotiable: contrarily, "any game involving actual weapons has strong *non-negotiable* consequences" (41) — feature six.

When I talk about play, I base myself on a definition similarly arising from a meta-study: that of Katie Salen & Eric Zimmerman. They define play as any "free movement within a more rigid structure" (2004, 304).[7] This definition incorporates playing games with clearly defined formal rules, ludic activities such as bouncing a ball or performing tricks or generally being playful in such activities as associative thought, improvised music or word play (ibid.). It furthermore allows for transformative play that challenges or invents rules (the type of reflexive play Malaby deals with); although the non-negotiable programmed rules of digital games may inhibit that. Nonetheless, play is an important element of games, while also being a general attitude that allows games to be a subset of them (303).

These are well-received and widely used definitions that are a valuable starting point which I do not deem important to problematize at this point. Far more problematic, perhaps, has been the interplay between games and playing; and the perceived bias some scholars purportedly show toward either of these concepts. It is for this reason that I deem it important to clarify my position within this particular nexus of scholarly debate as a central issue that informs my theoretical framework.

Addressing the relationship between game and play echoes a contemporary theoretical issue regarding the academic analysis of digital games. Although I am not interested, here, in resuscitating the entire issue, the following problem was recently brought up by play scholar Miguel Sicart. In his

[7] Dutch native speakers may benefit from the existence of the word 'speling,' which is a specific type of play that correlates more exactly with Salen and Zimmerman's abstract definition, as well as corresponding to media scholar John Fiske's apostrophed use of the way in which a text "has 'play' in it, like a door whose hinges are loose" (Fiske 1987, 230).

slightly polemical article 'Against Procedurality,' Sicart problematizes what he calls "proceduralism," a dominant or "popular way of conducting computer games scholarship" (2011). Proceduralism, a category of scholarship that Sicart predominantly identifies with game scholar Ian Bogost, assumes an understanding of the rule-based operations (the *procedures*) of digital games as important and sufficient to analyze games. In other words, "procedurality is understood not just as an ontological marker of computer games, but as the specific way in which computer games build discourses of ethical, political, social and aesthetic value" (2011). In Bogost's own wording, 'procedural rhetoric' is indeed "a type of persuasion [that] is tied to the core affordances of the computer: computers run processes, they execute calculations and rule-based symbolic manipulation" (2007, ix).

Sicart's characterization of procedurality is admittedly extreme, much like the "phantom" enemy of ludologists' "own creation" was, back in the earlier debate above (in note 4; Murray, 2005). This much has indeed been admitted in a joint panel at the DiGRA conference in 2013 (Lederle-Ensign, 2013). But Sicart nonetheless raises a very valuable point. The point is that a method based on cataloguing the procedures of a game is not sufficient because it instrumentalizes players: it assumes that players merely "reconfigure the meanings embedded in the rules defined by the designers" (2011). The assumption is, as Sicart later rephrased it, that "the meaning of games is contained in the formal system of the game" (2013). In this way, who or what is playing is suggested to be unimportant: each player finishes the intended auctorial message unlocking the readable game system. I have likened Sicart's criticism of strictly formalist readings elsewhere as a Barthesian moment or argument in the field of game studies, "because of his call for the re-cognition of players as configurators and interpreters of games' meanings" (de Wildt, 2014, 2).

The call, then, is to re-include the player (and indeed 'play') in analyses of games and their production of meaning. Indeed it has often been overlooked in subsequent discussions that Sicart's position was never an all-out critique on trying to 'read games as procedures' but one aimed at "expanding it [procedural rhetorics] to include creative play" (2011).[8] Within the non-negotiable nature of programmed rules, play is an act of "appropriation and configuration that constitute the players' expression" (Sicart, 2013). Hence players appropriate the play experience as something more than what the game strictly suggests they do: players look for borders, mistakes, bugs, ways to cheat and ways to subvert the procedural structure of games within the affordances, constraints and goals presented by it.

I henceforth follow Sicart to the extent that I consider playing not as merely "a reconfiguration of the meanings that are embedded in the rules created by the designers" (2011). Instead, I consider

[8] Among the early responses to the debate were Björk & Juul, 2012; Hawreliak, 2012; Joseph, 2012; Nelson, 2012; Pratt, 2012

games in the same way as the closing statement of 'Against Procedurality' suggests: "where the rules are a dialogue and the message, a conversation" (2011). Less cryptically, the formal features of a game are in dialogue with the player; together their 'conversation' constitutes the received meaning of game-play. Part of the reason for my inclusion of receptions, as mentioned above, is thus in agreement with Sicart's Barthesian argument, in order to, as literary theorist Wolfgang Iser puts it, account for "the interaction between [a text's] structure and its recipient," wherein texts are schematized aspects "through which the aesthetic object of the work can be produced" (1980, 106). I will comment on the comparison between ludic structures and textual structures in my first chapter, as I discuss the necessity to recognize an added step of actualization in the act of playing games.

Iser furthermore, as a student of Hans-Georg Gadamer, elaborates on his teacher's philosophy on play. Iser, similar to his ideas on texts, theorizes play as based in interactions, or "countervailing movements," between free and instrumental play (1991, 237). That is, between the "boundary-crossing", "transcending movement" of free play that "aim[s] in the direction of a still indeterminate target" and the instrumental play that is aimed toward a goal, towards ending the game (237-38) – what Caillois called *paidia* (improvisational, joyful play) and *ludus* (disciplined, skilful play), respectively (1958, 27-33). Rather than occurring in pure forms, game-play occurs in between these poles of free playfulness and instrumental rule-governance, "ultimately playing with and against each other" (Iser, 1991, 238). Throughout my thesis, I have kept the interplay between games and play in mind, accordingly. In my third chapter, I will further develop a game-play dialectic. For now, it is important to note that its basis lies within this tension touched upon, most recently, by the proceduralism-debate.

As a final, semi-related note on framework: this thesis is inevitably written in the framework of the English language. Fortunately, much game scholarship is too. Still, it is important to be aware of this language as a mode of expressing the concepts at hand. Because of this linguistic frame, I will often start out by reflecting on – i.e. to bend [*flectere*] back [*re-*] to – problematic concepts in part through an etymological approach. While this may certainly seem superficial, superfluous or straightforwardly pedantic, its value lies in coming to terms with the origin and use from which the concept arises historically.

That being said, there is a specific concept central to my theoretical framework that requires elaboration at length: etymologically, historically and theoretically. To that concept I will turn now.

0.3. METHODOLOGY: A WORKING DEFINITION OF IDEOLOGY

My working definition for the concept of ideology at the heart of this thesis is as follows:

> Ideology is a way of organizing a world by means of a set of conventions, upheld through power, that has achieved quasi-natural status, thereby erasing its alternatives

> and alienating ideological subjects from a pre-ideological experience without these conventions as a result of which the affordances, constraints and desires offered to a subject within that ideology are paradoxically limited while choice appears to be free and autonomous.

As this is quite an unwieldy definition, I will break it up into pieces, arguing for each individually.

As a discourse on or account of *ideas* (forms, patterns), ideology is "a way of organizing a world by means of a set of conventions" by which I mean to say those patterns in which we order our world according to linguistic, social, political, artistic and religious conventions. By 'world' I do not mean an ontological earth or collection of a priori things within that world, but rather a cultural world – *mundus* [world, universe, mankind] rather than *terra* [world, earth, land] or *globus* [sphere] – akin to world-view. In other, more Heideggerian words, I use 'world,' here, as an ontical environment (*Umwelt*) in which *Dasein* occurs (or 'lives'), one that is divorced from the ontological-existential world: the everyday public or domestic world (1967, 65). [9] As ways of organizing that cultural world, I take societies, cultures, linguistic communities and nations, religious, political and economic systems to be immediate examples of ideological organizations. Suffice to say that the world meant here is a cultural (linguistic, social, political) construct in which we organize those spheres on the basis of conventions. Examples of these conventions will hopefully shed light on the concept.

Literary scholar Ernst van Alphen's specific semiotic reading of a convention is as a "rule that fixes [fastens] meaning" in the process of a subject's decoding a sign (1987, 42). A linguistic convention may be the Subject-Verb-Object order of the English language; a social convention may be that women belong in the kitchen and men financially support the family; and so on. A conventional nature of these ways of organizing language, society (nations; morality; etc.) come into focus more clearly when we look at them 'from a distance,' such as in the seemingly old-fashioned example of domestic gender roles. An example of a political convention from a historical distance would be that of a King such as Louis XIV who, by virtue of his lineage, rules over his subjects within his realm, levying taxes, implementing laws, and so on.

Historical changes show that these organizations are indeed 'conventional:' what might long be experienced as 'normal' or simply 'the way things are in the world' may change. I follow Ernst van Alphen in calling conventions *ideological* when the experience of those conventions is as 'just the way

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[9] So, Heidegger's third meaning/importance (*Bedeutung*) of world in *Sein und Zeit* (1967):
"Welt kann wiederum in einem ontischen Sinne verstanden werden, jetzt aber nicht als das Seiende, das das Dasein wesenhaft nicht ist und das innerweltlich begegnen kann, sondern als das, »worin« ein faktisches Dasein als dieses »lebt«. Welt hat hier eine vorontologisch existenzielle Bedeutung. Hierbei bestehen wieder verschiedene Möglichkeiten: Welt meint die »öffent-liche« Wir-Welt oder die »eigene« und nächste (häusliche) Umwelt" (65).

things are'[10] – as, in a word, natural (1987, 44). It is problematic to state that conventions experienced as or taken to be natural are 'actually' natural if we consider, as an example, the contradictive ideological conventions – in this case social, political and religious – regarding homosexuality.

It is perhaps productive, in light of the above examples, to compare ideology to Law, as "a system of enforceable rules governing social relations and legislated by a political system" (Sypnowich, 2010). Indeed law may be, in a sense, the "legal expression of an ideology" (ibid.), but a few immediate differences must be noted within the scope of this thesis. First, ideology often falls outside of the usual range of law – although, arguably, the reverse is not true. We see this in the case of that formerly ideological convention that women are more fit for the kitchen; or in the ideological convention that hard physical labour is worth less than managing it due to market value.

Furthermore, law is explicit and therefore transparent. Ideology, rather, is implicit and consequently opaque: by virtue of their quasi-naturalness, ideological conventions erase their alternatives. Semiotician Umberto Eco uses a hypothetical signal-producing apparatus – which van Alphen also uses as an example – to argue for ideological uses of signs as fundamentally erasing alternative significations. In his hypothetical apparatus, two signals, /Z/ and /ZZZZ/ denote a minimum of heat and pressure and a maximum thereof (1976, 290). More pressure is dangerous, more heat might give comfort, both result in higher production. In the case of reception by a human being, who understands these signals, the signal is transformed into a meaningful sign: i.e. a "correlation between an expression [/Z/] and a content [a minimum of pressure in Eco's example]" (292). Based on a previous bias (against risk, for example; or for production), one language user may interpret and communicate the sign /ZZZZ/ as beneficial, solely through its *choice* of "circumstantial selection that attributes a certain property" to /ZZZZ/ (i.e. more heat is more production), while "concealing or ignoring other contradictory properties" of /ZZZZ/ (i.e. more heat is also more pressure, hence risk) (293). By communicating the sign as such, the signal /ZZZZ/ is by convention understood as risk-free, productive and warming; erasing the "potential contradiction between, on the one hand, «production and pressure» and on the other «heating and pressure»" (294).

There are some problems with this example: the biased interpretation of the sign assumes somebody in power as the only one to interpret and communicate the signal; the experiment assumes a finite semantic space (two signs, a finite number of interpretations); and Eco's laboratory setting is untenable – once the machine explodes the ideology cannot hold. The first two objections both stress the necessity of power to maintain ideology – a particular sovereignty or position of power must uphold a convention in order to limit the relevant semantic possibilities. Maintaining the natural status of a convention entails excluding (or simply ridiculing) its alternatives in narratives, models and the

[10] "Deze codes krijgen iets natuurlijks: 'zo is't nu eenmaal' of 'zo gaat 't nu eenmaal'" (van Alphen, 1987, 44).

like. As we will see, digital games are particularly fit to present biased models of the world in which such unilaterality can be upheld. This also, conveniently, dismantles the third objection within the realm of digital games or indeed all media: there is nothing stopping a simulation from modelling Eco's machine in such a way that it does not explode.

The necessity of power for ideology is, in part, exactly where I part with van Alphen's general optimism regarding ideology. He concludes his theoretical analysis of ideology with the argument that "when subjects are convinced of the harmfulness of their way of assigning meaning they will perhaps assign meaning in another way and consequently shape another reality" (71).[11] The assumptions involved in this claim are that of an infinite semantic space, created by decoding subjects who are "in principle free" (46). There is some sense to this: subjects may create new codes through interpreting signs and may consequently "expand the semantic space around a sign" (46). But it also assumes, perhaps naively, the subject to be an autonomous, independent actor in charge of assigning meaning wholly apart from communities. If we take ideological conventions to be principally pertinent to communities (and irrelevant to isolated individuals), then there are inevitably power relations involved that aim to erase some of the alternative significations of the machine's signals. The factory worker, the machine's producer and the owner of the factory will likely have different interests in maintaining the accepted signification of the machine as 'just the way things are'.

If ideology is a power-ful way of organizing a world, that is manifested by means of a set of conventions – conventions that have achieved quasi-natural status by erasing their alternatives – then what does it mean for that biased set of conventions to 'alienate ideological subjects from a pre-ideological experience without these conventions'? If there is an assumption here, it is that there might be such a thing as 'pre-ideological experience'. I am not particularly interested in what 'comes before ideological experience'. *Either* there is no such thing as pre-ideological experience, and ideological conventions wholly shape our experience – such as in the case of some linguistic relativity hypotheses, stating that language principally generates cultural and cognitive categories (Kay and Kempton, 1984; Penn, 1972). *Or*, there *is* an innate experience or desire outside of cultural, linguistic and other ideological conventions from which we are divorced once we enter language. This latter position is a key argument in Lacanian psychoanalysis. Lacan speculates about a pre-linguistic state in which the child experiences a fragmented reality of bodily desires. It is "precipitated in a primordial form, *before it is objectified* in the dialectic of identification with the other, and *before language* restores to it […] its function as subject" (1977, 2, emphasis added). When the child is confronted with their own image (classically through a mirror – i.e. in the 'mirror stage' of the Lacanian subject's development) they

[11] "Wanneer subjecten overtuigd raken van de schadelijkheid van hun manier van zingeven zullen ze wellicht op een andere manier gaan zingeven en zodoende een andere werkelijkheid vormen" (van Alphen, 1987, 71).

will learn to identify with that image. It is, in other words, a separate other – an "*imago of one's own body*" – upon entering the world of images (ibid.). This is an imaginary relation in two senses: it is an identification with an image that turns out to not to be 'other' but a reflection of the child itself, copying its movements and so on; and it is an imaginary identification in the sense that it is in an imagined (i.e. 'thought up') relation to the reflection (ibid.). This identification with the mirror image "symbolizes the mental permanence of the I, at the same time as it prefigures its alienating destination" (ibid.).

What is this alienating destination? Upon entering into language the child enters into socio-cultural relations. When the child enters the symbolic order of language, their identification with the image is re-mediated through language as a sign for the own body. In other words, the original unity of pre-linguistic experience is broken, as the objectifying system of language – reducing the body to another sign within the sign system – leads to an "ever-growing dispossession of that being of his [the subject]" (32). Lacan enigmatically formulates a subject's effort of explaining who they are, as a "labour which he [the subject] undertakes to reconstruct *for another*" that leads to a "rediscover[y of] the fundamental alienation that made him construct it *like another*, and which has always destined it to be taken from him *by another*" (ibid., emphasis original).

Lacanian theory remains productive and relevant for theories on the subject, while at the same time being impossible to validate. I argue that the reason both of these things are true is because it is impossible to adequately articulate, within language, a state *before* language. However, seeing as I argue for linguistic conventions to be ideologically charged, this entails an alienation from the *I* before ideology. Indeed, if I follow philosopher John Searle in regarding "language [as] the basic social institution in the sense that all others presuppose language" (1995, 60) – and to what extent can political, religious or social institutions function outside a sign system? – the whole of ideological conventions are entered into. In this case, ideological conventions, from the linguistic to the political, all presuppose or use language, indicating a fundamental alienation from a potential 'pre-linguistic' subjectivity, always already shaped by ideological conventions.

Even if we reject Lacanian psychoanalysis as a valid way to theorize the pre-ideological subject, I maintain that this subject is either unknowable, indescribable or non-existent. Hence, the specific ideological conventions of the world we enter into order (both in the senses of organize as well as govern) our affordances, constraints and desires. Another, final objection to my proposition that ideological conventions 'alienate subjects from pre-ideological experience' could be that the pre-ideological human is born already with the constraints and desires offered to them by ideology. That seems unlikely, given the existence of different, overlapping and historically contingent ideologies: is the child born in an Islamic, capitalist and/or democratic world born with an innate desire to follow its conventions?

Finally, by the 'affordances, constraints and desires' offered to the subject as a result of the ideologically organized world, I mean to indicate the possibilities available to a subject within

ideology. That is to say, what *actions* or what choices are made possible, impossible and desirous? Death is a good example: Christian ideologies, for example, highly discourage the act of suicide. To this end it posits a clearly identifiable sovereignty, God, which is omniscient and has the ability to punish those who chose to end their life early. Self-infliction of death is thus constrained within a Christian ideology – an idea potentially ludicrous to those alien to its ideology. Yet it is in the interest of many ideologies to organize their world with some manner of constraint regarding suicide, including all those ideologies based on the productivity of labouring subjects. A previous, perhaps less dramatic example should further illuminate the organization of affordances, constraints and desires: consider, again, the outdated convention that men work out of the home and women work within the home. Both genders will have different affordances (e.g. earn income—manage the house), different constraints (e.g. the inability to switch these roles) and desires (e.g. a promotion—clean dishes).

These affordances, etc. are paradoxically 'limited while choice appears free and autonomous' *only* in the case of conventions that are quasi-natural: when the alternatives are erased (e.g. each gender carries clearly differentiated financial and domestic responsibilities) and all subjects involved are alienated from any desires they might have otherwise (imagine desires of autonomy, solitariness, non-productivity and so on). The paradox between limitation and the freedom of autonomous choice within those constraints lies in the possibility of ignorance toward the limitations. Only when the alternatives are unknown, impossible or simply rendered ridiculous can limited choice seem fully autonomous, i.e. only then will I call them *ideological* conventions, instead of just conventions as such.

As mentioned, my aim within this thesis is not so much to argue for an a-historical and infallible proof of ideology; but rather to provide a working definition for the use of the concept throughout this thesis. In chapter 1, below, I will argue for the way in which games serve to model ideology by a resemblance in structure that allows them to intervene in ideological conventions by re-affirming *or* subverting them.

1. ORGANIZING PLAY

> "*Cart Life* is a retail simulation which utilizes common video game conventions and other previously employed devices to tell stories that deal with social stratification, food, romance, money and death. […] Please enjoy playing this game."
>
> – Start menu (*Cart Life*, Richard Hofmeier, 2011)

The V-button on my keyboard is slightly damaged. Typing that letter requires a noticeable increase of effort over others. Working as Andrus in Richard Hofmeier's 'retail simulation' *Cart Life* (2011), I am required to repeatedly type the sentence "It folds into halves." in order to mimic the repetitive effort of folding and laying out newspapers in my stand (Figure 1). Oddly enough, my broken V-key led to *real* frustration with the monotonous task: mistyping led to torn newspapers, and torn newspapers cannot be sold, while selling newspapers was my character's main source of income! This was emphatically a bad thing, not because *Cart Life* simulates so well the way that markets work, but because of its particular emphasis as a *stylized* simulation. It simulates not the market as a whole, but specifically presents a libertarian capitalist market from the position of individuals in its bottom segment: an immigrant, a single mother or an uneducated bagel salesman.

Games have the exceptional ability, as systems, to present dynamic worlds: actors interact procedurally, actions influence different variables, outcomes are presented, and so on. Even necessarily without the participation of a player, many games express systematic worlds. This chapter takes, as much as possible, the abstract notion of emphasizing the game in isolation as a formal structure, before involving the player fully in the next chapter. Depending on what is presented and *how*, games may mimic, or radically depart from, the world as we have organized it by simulating it: its market, say, or racial relations – games may even adjust the laws of physics.

Rather than focus on such things as the simulation of physics or natural laws, this chapter is a first step in my inquiry for all the *ideological* capabilities of digital games. Hence, this chapter works through the following research question:

> How is game design, through the formal characteristics of the game, capable of proposing a model of a world in a way that is ideological?

The way that this question is phrased implies, at least ostensibly, the assumption that games *are* indeed capable of proposing an ideological world view. This research question, including its leading assumption, is vital for my main research question *because* it may well turn out false: what if there are

Figure 1. "It folds into hales," (*Cart Life*, Richard Hofmeier, 2011)

no formal characteristics capable of expressing ideology? Or, perhaps more plausibly, what if not all digital games carry those design characteristics? Still, it is an assumption the reader must be aware of, and the formulation of the question indicates the scope of this chapter and, to an extent, this MA-thesis.

Due to the scope and history of ideology criticism, the aims of both this question and this thesis are necessarily confined. The aim is, as stated above, not so much to argue for the exact characteristics of ideology; to identify the origins or genealogy of ideology; or to argue for the possibility of cultural artefacts to carry ideology in principal. Nor is it my intention to identify the dominant or alternative ideologies available in the contemporary political, cultural or religious landscape. Such an argument would far transcend the scope of this project. Rather, my intention is to be able to adequately identify ideologic*al* conventions – conventions pertaining to ideologies – and to recognize how, if at all, digital gaming conventions may simulate the ideological. Such an endeavour necessarily assumes both the existence of ideologies and the potentiality for digital games to express ideology. The latter of these is potentially validated through an answer to this question. Having addressed the assumptions inherent in my research question as a necessary – but not necessarily true – logical presumption, I will briefly further specify my research question.

Three important concerns arise out of the formulation of the question above, which will inform both its answer as well as the structure of this chapter. It prompts the questions: How can game design be ideological? What are formal characteristics of game design? And how do digital games propose a model of *a* world? For the sake of clarity and argument, I will treat these questions in reverse order. After introducing this chapter's principal case study I will first argue for digital games as possible worlds, presented through stylized simulation. Second, I will identify the ability of formal characteristics to intervene in ideological conventions, by re-affirming or contradicting them as a part of their possible world. Consequently, I hope to show how game design may indeed present ideology.

1.1. CASE STUDY

This chapter will reflect on and be principally informed by my first case study: *Cart Life*. Designed by Richard Hofmeier in 2011, the game may be considered an example of the 'indie' genre (from independent developer) akin to the vaguely defined 'art house' genre in cinema: relatively low-budget productions by small teams or single developers that are not employed by, or bound to, large development companies.

Cart Life offers control over one of three street vendors, each attempting to earn an income while attending to their health, addictions and obligations – including such mundane necessities as sleep, sustenance, rent or children. In 2013, *Cart Life* won the Independent Games Festival's Seumas McNally Grand Prize, Nuovo Award and Excellence in Narrative award (Conditt, 2013).

The game is an interesting first example, in part for its unusually explicit and identifiable auctorial positions. *Cart Life* was developed by one author with a clear 'autograph' (in the sense of *autós* [self] and *gráphō* [write]): Richard Hofmeier is (almost) solely responsible for the game's creation.[12]

This might be regarded unusual when compared to digital games that are commercial, labour-intensive, high-risk investment products – so called 'AAA' or triple A 'blockbuster'-games. AAA-games such as *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North, 2013) or *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (Infinity Ward, 2011) are developed by hundreds of people over the course of multiple years – diverging any single, independent authorial voice such as that of *Cart Life*.[13] This may grant an initial

[12] 'Almost,' because the game was made within the affordances and constraints of the open-source development tool *Adventure Game Studio* (Jones, 1997), which inevitably influences the game's design.

[13] For the sake of comparison: *Cart Life* was made by one man and is completely free. *Modern Warfare 3* was made by "two studios and almost 200 development staff working on the title" (Stuart, 2011). *Grand Theft Auto V* was made by over a thousand people, according to Rockstar North president Andy Semple in an interview, "probably more, much more" (French, 2013). These particular games were chosen for size and revenue: both held the record for sales on opening-day – *GTA V* holds the current record at $800 million in its first 24 hours (Edwards, 2013).

analytical benefit due to *Cart Life*'s relatively explicit and coherent auctorial instance, intention, or even agenda. Before returning to my case study, however, it is important to return to the way games might model worlds.

1.2. PRESENTING POSSIBLE WORLDS

In light of my definition of ideology, I will argue for digital games as models capable of presenting a stylized simulation of a possible world. I consider the worlds presented by digital games as intervening in ideological conventions by re-assuring or contradicting them. In order to answer my question of how games are, in the first place, capable of proposing models of ideological worlds, I will proceed as follows. First, I argue by comparison with theatre that digital games posit possible worlds, but that they seem to *present* them – rather than *re*present them. Second, I will bring the concept of simulation into dialogue with *Cart Life* as a 'retail simulator'. I will argue that, instead of simulating a possible world holistically, games present us with a *stylized* simulation. I will proceed to reflect on the particular possible world of *Cart Life* to argue that the game offers a set of affordances, constraints and desires that presents a challenge to the ideological convention of laissez-faire economics.

Semiotician Keir Elam, asking what kind of "world [it is that] is constructed in the course of performance," theorizes the dramatic mode of representation as a "spatio-temporal elsewhere represented as though actually present for the audience" (1980, 61). This understanding of a dramatic mode entails two things: that the theatre operates by way of presentation; and that what it presents is a previously constructed narrative 'elsewhere' that is represented. In other words, the theatre re-presents a "there-and-then, […] expressed in the here-and-now" (Dubbelman, 2011, 160).

Dramatic representation, according to Elam, has a 'world-creating' capacity (1980, 61): he bases his argument on the logical semantic 'theory of possible worlds,' the idea that "possible—as opposed to actual—states of affairs may be set up through hypothesis," by such things as wishes, orders, stories and so on (ibid.). Elam argues that fictional worlds in drama and text, due to their fragmentary and incomplete description, demand a spectator to imagine this world "on the basis of conventional clues;" as a result of which the filling of informational gaps demands the spectator projects "possible future developments in the action […] to create his own 'worlds'" (62). Drama's opposition to actuality, as a consequence, "cannot be understood unless some notion of hypothetical worlds […] is applied" (ibid.).

Performance scholar Chiel Kattenbelt stresses the necessity of an auctorial instance responsible for the construction or organization of a possible world as an abstract entity that presentatively

articulates that world – its "objects, events and actions" (2006, 24).[14] Kattenbelt can attribute this 'creating or designing' function to the auctorial instance because he defines that abstract instance from *auctor* as 'responsible person,' 'designer,' 'creator,' 'authority' and so on (ibid.).[15] Indeed, the Latin *auctor* is from *auctus* < *augeō*: to augment, enrich, enlarge or increase. More than a narrow French or English term 'author' or, in parallel, 'authorial instance,' that "sets forth written statements," Kattenbelt's auctorial instance is an instance that gives increase, "who originates or gives existence to anything," "who gives rise to or causes an action, event, circumstance, state, or condition of things" ("author, n." *OED Online*, 2014).

The auctorial instance, then, is a concept I take to stand for the combined forces that organize the presented objects, events and actions that make up the stage play, literary narrative or the digital game. It is the full scale of writers, lighting technicians, actors and so on that present the stage play. It is the narrator (the external or internal organizing instance that "utters language which […] represents a story" [Bal, 1985, 19]) of literary narrative. Or it is the executed code of programmers and writers that generate the actions and events of designed objects in elaborate simulation.

That presentation, articulated by the abstract auctorial instance of simulation, has an ambiguous relation to the idea of representation, which for Elam makes sense as a staged "representation and construct[ion] according to particular ('dramatic') conventions" (1980, 2). I am not particularly interested in the simulation of a scripted narrative on stage, as much as I am, here, concerned with the particular presentation of simulation. Simulation, according to literary scholar Frans-Willem Korsten, is "a noun indicating a form of action that originally goes back to the Latin *simulare*: to imitate, to feign, to depict in a visual way" (2012). Simulation's *imitation* "plays with the dynamic of representation, whilst at the same time not being truly representational" of a 'real thing' – it functions, rather, as a stand-in of the real. Epistemological concerns of the 'real' aside, the practice of simulation "serves to indicate, in a rather straightforward sense, ordinary forms of practice that have been fairly common in many different cultures and throughout all periods" (ibid.). Korsten's example is that of simulation as a 'mode of training,' in the everyday sense that pilots may practice flying aircrafts or

[14] "Een mogelijke wereld is in het voorgaande aangeduid als een constructie waarvoor een auctoriale instantie verantwoordelijk is. Deze "verantwoordelijkheid" ligt primair besloten in het gegeven dat de auctoriale instantie de schepper of ontwerper is van de mogelijke wereld die door haar in het esthetische object presentatief is gearticuleerd" (Kattenbelt, 2006, 24). Elsewhere, the aesthetic object of the theatre play as a possible world is stated vice versa as "de objecten, gebeurtenissen en handelingen die in de esthetisch waargenomen performatieve situatie zijn ingekaderd, vormen een mogelijke wereld," i.e. the aesthetically perceived performative situation [the play] contains, or consists of, objects, events and actions (ibid.).

[15] "De term 'auctoriale instantie' is afgeleid van het Latijnse zelfstandig naamwoord auctor (i.e. 'verantwoordelijke persoon'). In zijn verscheidenheid aan betekenissen - waaronder 'ontwerper', 'bouwer', 'stichter', 'schepper', 'uitvinder', 'raadgever', 'leidsman', 'zegsman', 'autoriteit', 'woordvoerder', 'getuige' - bestrijkt het begrip het brede spectrum van de verschillende posities die de auctoriale instantie ten opzichte van de mogelijke wereld die zij construeert kan innemen. Ook verantwoordt de term dat de auctoriale instantie tot op zekere hoogte een autoriteitsfunctie vervult" (Kattenbelt, 2006, 24).

soldiers may train for combat. *America's Army* serves as a particularly tangible example of the way that combat simulation may provide an approximation of 'real' combat without the consequences – all the more so in its use in professional army training (Snider 2005; Jean 2006; Testa 2008).

In the case of computer simulation it is worth questioning to what sense it still re-presents an elsewhere, a then-and-there that was pre-organized. Rather, the emergent and procedurally generated situations of digital games may be said to present a 'here-and-now'. According to Elam, "dramatic worlds" – as opposed to "classical narratives' […] explicit *there and then*" – are "presented to the spectator as hypothetically actual constructs" that are "seen in progress 'here and now' without narratorial mediation" (1980, 67). Dubbelman pointedly questions this, asking that if this is true, "to what extent are these events still representational in nature as the audience witnesses the events unfolding directly in front of them" (2011, 161)?

Most digital games, as well as many modern forms of film and theatre, deploy a "presentational story performance," (165) in which spectators are acknowledged by the objects, events and actions of the possible world. When actors acknowledge audiences' presence – by looking into the camera, or interacting with them directly – events unfold in the "the perceptual field of our direct, first-hand or lived experience, even when mediated through a screen or some other means of transmission" (165).[16] As a spectator or player, I remain in the here-and-now of lived experience. Jesper Juul similarly argues that "the story time is *now*" in the sense that "events are *happening* now, and that what comes next is not yet determined" (2005b, 223; emphasis original).

Juul would later, in the same year, argue that games are in a sense 'half-real,' in that we interact with an 'actual' ruleset governing a fictional character (2005a, 163). Indeed, something would be missing if we would simply conclude so far that simulations present a possible world that is organized by an auctorial instance. That organizing instance is vital in determining the *scope* of that simulation. As the example of *Cart Life* will show, it is not holistically a simulation in the sense that it imitates an all-encompassing worldview. As such, the simulation done by games is seldom completely 'real itself,' although it may have consequences that are.

A pivotal term for Elam's possible world is the opposition to an 'actual'. Consider the idea, again, of representation as a "spatio-temporal elsewhere represented as though actually present" or the proposal that "possible—as opposed to actual—states of affairs may be set up through hypothesis" (Elam, 2005, 61; emphases added). Elsewhere, "illusionistic 'virtuality' has always been one of the dominant characteristics of the spectacle" (41). This opposition between the (illusionistic) virtual and the actual is part of a narrow understanding of virtuality. Rather, virtual from *virtus* (strength,

[16] Pepita Hesselberth makes a similar case for a genre of post-cinematic film that demands a reading beyond representational logic and that is located in the 'here' and 'now' with 'me' (2012).

manliness, virtue) can denote a *potential*. As literary scholar Marie-Laure Ryan argues, it was not until the beginning of the 18th and 19th centuries that the scholastic concept of virtus as force or power gave way to a binary opposition with real. Rather, scholastic Latin *virtualis* "designates the potential, 'what is in the power (virtus) of the force'" – the classic (Aristotelian) example of which would be the potentiality of the oak within the acorn (1999, 88).

Electronic texts, according to Ryan, are doubly virtual. Whereas texts move from the virtual to the actual in the reader's mental construction (actuality) of the multi-interpretable collection of signs written by the author (virtual); electronic texts such as digital games create "an additional level of mediation between the text as produced by the author […] and the text as experienced by the reader" (96). The text is written or engineered by an auctorial instance; the text is partially presented to the reader based on choices made in its interactive structure; and then the text is constructed mentally by the reader (97).

When I focus on the player-as-subject's dialectical relationship with the game-as-structure in the following chapters, I will discuss more thoroughly the intricacies of this double task for the interacting player. Important, for now, is that this notion of virtuality – as a potential of presentations in a possible world – requires a mediation between the virtual and the actual. As Ryan argues, this mediation "is not a deterministic process but a form-giving force" (92).

However, the text is increasingly determined (actualized) between absolute virtuality; the auctorial instance's organization; the performance of play; and the player's actual interpretation of the final artefact presented (Figure 2).

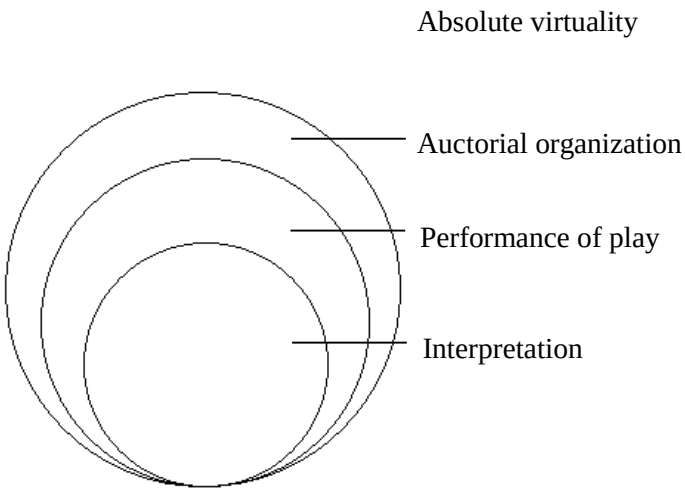

Figure 2. Steps of actualization

It is this first step of actualization that I will focus on for now: the auctorial instance's (or the developers') organization of the aesthetic object *before* the players' choices. Doing so, I will argue that *Cart Life*'s auctorial instance specifically limits the scope of its simulation. By design, the auctorial instance thereby already limits to some extent the actualization of the player's choices and interpretation. I will call this limited virtuality by the auctorial instance a stylized simulation of a possible world.

1.3. *CART LIFE* AS STYLIZED SIMULATION

In a game initially advertising itself as a *retail* simulator, profit is presented as having, above all, personal consequence. Compared to market games such as *Gazillionaire* (Lavamind, 1994) where players learn to buy and sell products between markets at different values to gain a profit, the profit made in *Cart Life* is less abstract. Money made is not simply points gained. My dollars granted Andrus the ability to feed his cat, smoke cigarettes, eat granola bars and – hopefully – pay the rent at the end of the week. And my V-button was seriously hindering that.

After years of getting used to a second-hand keyboard, I replaced it in order to fold newspapers. I realized while playing *Cart Life*, that I was engaged not for the thrill of profit, but because it models personal materiality in a capitalist market. Work, in this game, is a trite necessity. *Cart Life* is not truly about profit, market value or income. It is about barely making a living, paying the rent, finding distraction in chats with customers, upholding your addiction, feeding your daughter or cat – only to mercilessly break even, ready to spend the rest of your weeks in monotonous labour.

Through its particular focus in simulating a capitalist market, I argue that *Cart Life* adopts, as a stylized simulation, certain limitations to its semantic space. First, I will explain the notion of stylization in a way that a depiction or description reduces its image to expressive details. Second, I will briefly typify *Cart Life*'s particular simulation of economy. Third, I will indicate two specific stylistic limitations through formal aspects of *Cart Life* and argue how they present the affordances, constraints and desires particular to the game. Finally, I shall argue that these stylistic limitations intervene in specific ideological conventions by presenting the laissez-faire economics of American capitalism as inescapably unfair. Consequently, I will touch upon the ubiquity of ideological conventions by indicating that *Cart Life*, despite its critique of economic conventions, keeps intact other ideological conventions: the social convention of caring mothers and the cultural, economic and global-political conventions regarding immigrant work ethic.

I call *Cart Life*'s specific simulation of the market 'stylized' because it limits a simulation of reality 'in full' by choosing, and presenting in a specific light, certain elements or details of it. The notion of games as stylized simulations arose in early work on game design. Notably, game designer Chris Crawford mentions it in his *Art of Computer Game Design* (1984), stating that "where a simulation is detailed, a game is stylised" (9). A telling comparison by Crawford is that of a simulation

to a technical drawing and a game to a painting: a comparison of accuracy over expression. "A game is not merely a small simulation lacking the degree of detail that a simulation possesses; a game deliberately suppresses detail to accentuate the broader message that the designer wishes to present" (ibid.). Leaving aside, for the moment, the difficulties discussed earlier surrounding the full relevance of designer intention, the point is that digital games may accurately model some dynamics, but through exclusion, emphasis and scope be called *stylized*: "depicted or treated in a mannered and nonrealistic style" ("stylized, adj." *Oxford Dictionaries*, 2014); or "to conform (an artistic representation) to the rules of a conventional style; to conventionalize" ("stylize, v." *OED Online*, 2014).

Both definitions reveal something else: first, that stylization is a certain 'mannered' composition or shaping of realism; second, that it is often done so according to a set of conventions – style is, after all, etymologically a figurative use of the writing tool stilus, denoting traditions of artistic composition. As noted before, things are revealed as conventional exactly when we find that they can be changed (inventions of new styles, *stilum vertere*), although that possibility may be erased.

The characterization of games as stylized continues with Juul, for example, arguing that games are "stylized simulations; developed not just for fidelity to their source domain" but rather aesthetically adapting *elements* of the real world (2005a, 172). Games, in other words, simulate selectively, in such cases that "the simulation is oriented toward the perceived interesting aspects of soccer, tennis or being a criminal in a contemporary city" (ibid.). These limitations are both generative and constraining: as game scholar Joris Dormans argues, they "create both limitations and affordances" (2012, 26).

So, digital games have the ability to model systems, but they stylize them for aesthetic and practical purposes. Hence, many economic simulations leave out or diminish details uninteresting to those simulations for reasons of scope. Or, rather, this limiting (this practice of in- or exclusion and [de-]emphasis) *is* what defines the game's scope. The computational power behind games is apt to accurately simulate economy – the econometric discipline of game theory attests to that. As such, games seem exceptionally fit to try out organizations of societies: simulating variables of trade, large groups' behaviour and so on. Each simulation focuses on different aspects: *Gazillionaire* limits its possible world to the supply and demand between markets (in this case in interstellar context), leaving out the production of its materials. *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000) abstracts modes of production to 'time spent away from the house' and focuses on money as a resource to buy furniture and entertainment. *Cart Life* foregrounds work as a tedious, repetitive activity that is necessary for the most basic of life necessities.

The way in which the economic system of *Cart Life* is organized leans decidedly toward laissez-faire economics. Laissez-faire (the French imperative for 'let [them] do') is the type of 'classical economics' associated with Adam Smith, David Ricardo and comparable economic thinkers who advocate free trade and free competition without government interference (Gaspard, 2004, 5-6) – the

type of economics advocated by neoliberal politics.[17] That is, as far as interactions go in *Cart Life*, customers will walk by, compare their (very specific) desires to the price you have set and, if they choose to buy what you offer, grant you a certain (minimal) amount of time to process their order. Repeat their order, type out an action, give them the accurate amount of change and, if the product is presented exceptionally fast, possibly receive a tip. These are transactions between autonomous parties with little government restrictions: no value-added tax, no subsidies, no tax breaks for start-ups. Additionally, there is no social security for your character: what you earn and spend is all you have. Government restriction is limited only to the bureaucratic obstacle of getting a permit. Government is an obstacle: through its fines, the difficulty of finding city hall, and its unwieldy bureaucracy – I spent two out of the game's seven days waiting in a numbered queue for Melissa's coffee permit.[18]

Rather than a general indication of the game's presentation of market, I will focus on two of its stylistic limitations. *Cart Life*'s auctorial instance, as a first step of actualization, limits its simulation of the market in two ways: through the forced focalization of its characters and by its uncontrollable narrative events. The simulation is first of all limited by its offered choice of characters, all of which are in a specifically precarious economic position. The game offers the choice of one of three characters: Andrus Podner, a Ukrainian immigrant addicted to smoking; Vinny, an uneducated bagel cook who is addicted to caffeine; and Melanie Emberley, a recently divorced mother who needs to spend time with her daughter Laura (Figure 3). As one of them, the player must run a newspaper stand, bagel cart or coffee hut in order to make ends meet. In other words, all of these characters are markedly within the bottom segment of the market. When the player takes control of them, they have little financial security and nobody particularly looking out for them (although Melanie's sister, as an exception, cooks for her). The game demands the player to become fully self-supportive with only limited time to set up a successful business between distractions, physical necessities and setbacks.

[17] The term 'classical economy' was allegedly coined by Karl Marx, writing of the "chief failings of classical economy," i.e. its lack of analysis regarding commodities; a school of which "Adam Smith and [David] Ricardo [are] the best representatives of the school" (1867, 93).

[18] At the end of the first day, it was finally my turn, but it was time to pick up Laura from school. The game randomly gives out numbers for the queue and one has to simply be lucky.

Figure 3. Melanie Emberley (*Cart Life*, Richard Hofmeier, 2011)

A second limitation I choose to focus on is the occurrence of narrative events that cannot be influenced. These are, at least initially, a direct consequence of the character's background – Andrus has just migrated and needs to find a home; Melanie just got a divorce and needs a profit of at least $ 1000,- to pay for a lawyer in her custody hearing. The game does not merely exist of constraints: some things are optional. Talking to the cleaning lady (although expressly forbidden by your landlord) has no benefit except for a bit of warmth entirely unnecessary to the game's completion. The game additionally affords such petty things as small talk with customers, alcoholic beverages or eating out, even though no character *needs* alcohol and may just as well get by on a diet of granola bars.

As the game progresses, Andrus' landlord will increasingly harass him. As characters go to sleep they dream. You walk them, naked, past a world of price tags and queued silhouettes of all their customers, past an immobile artefact of the User Interface (usually a mouse pointer on the ground), to reach a grotesque version of your stand or cart.[19] Dreams eventually reveal things about your character: Melanie dreams of not being able to talk to her daughter; Andrus meets his deceased wife at

[19] 'Let's play' Youtube caster, Jef Major, one of many people recording his playthrough of this and other games, appropriately calls this recurring dream across characters "capitalism lane" (2012).

a Ukrainian lake ("You wanted to meet me here?"), but that dream is interrupted with her mentioning the news of her pregnancy. The word 'news' prompts the dream's transportation to a world filled with newspapers and Andrus' news stand. Without mention of it, Andrus wakes up and the next day starts. Another dream has her ask him "do you miss me?" – a question transferred to the player:

> " 1. Yes I still miss you.
> 2. No, I've begun to move on."
>
> (Hofmeier, 2013)

Rather than directly offer things to do and things you can't do, these narrative events reveal characters' desires and, through affordance and constraint, imply you in them – players are afforded the ability to choose for Andrus, while at the same time being constrained to taking a choice that engages the question. I call this an affordance because it is a property of the formal game that grants the potential to act, while it is a constraint due to its confinement of action, in that it is compulsory to engage with the choice.

Because of this implication of the player in the characters' desires, empathy becomes a central factor fuelling the desire to play *Cart Life*. Although trivial to the overall functioning of the game itself, the tragedies presented drove me as a player to finish each dreary, depressing day in the first place. These desires appear as a fundamental driving force behind *Cart Life*'s game-play, and this proves to be true for many players (cf. Goodwin 2012; Donlan 2013; Petit 2013).[20]

The visual style supports this, following Hofmeier's own argument that the game's pixelated abstractions of gestures and faces allow us to "fill in their details with our own lives" (Donlan 2013). Cartoonist and comics theorist Scott McCloud's claim that "de-emphasizing the appearance of the physical world in favour of the idea of form" allows the comic book to place "itself in the world of concepts" (1993, 41). Juul compares McCloud's claim to games' stylized nature by similarly arguing that "by removing detail from the source domain, the game focuses on a specific *idea* of what the game is about" (2005a, 170, emphasis original).

[20] In an interview with Christian Donlan, Hofmeier describes his game as essentially "sad, boring, depressing [...] 'It's time-consuming,' he laughs cheerily. 'And awful'," calling it "boring on purpose" (2013). The game is playable, according to the interviewer, only because of its characters: "these are the people who keep you working, and they're the people who truly make the game stand out, through their range, the casual complexity of their construction, the fact that they're consistently less stagey than you expect them to be. They're wry studies in frailty, drawn with an awareness of the power of subtext" (ibid.).

Journalist Joel Goodwin opens his article stating "I actually feel guilty. How did that happen? I'm sitting at my PC, cringing. I just don't want to watch this play out. But Melanie doesn't have any choice so neither do I. I press the SPACE bar and we move on, together" (2012).

More than an ideal simulation, then, *Cart Life*'s stylized nature works towards a specific idea, shaped by its stylization. Its simplified rules of economy thus present a set of affordances, constraints and desires unique to the game: affordances include tipping salesmen, aiding beggars, the ability to try out different bagel recipes (Vinny) or offer coffee as well as newspapers (Andrus) for example. Constraints manifest as constant necessities such as hunger, feeding Mr. Glembovski or spending time with Laura. I added that it also elicits desires: players report a desire for Andrus to find a meaningful social connection after the tragic death of his wife; or for Melanie to get custody of her daughter – "or at least equal time with her" (thepixelbeat, 2012). Or, poignantly, for Andrus to stand up against his landlord, George. The latter desire is acknowledged by the game in one of Andrus' endings: if the rent cannot be paid, George will threaten to call the police, kill your cat and take your belongings – prompting the option to stab the landlord. The result is all the more disappointing: Andrus releases his cat, writes a final poem about the schedule of death and prepares to die,[21] having nobody left to care for. The credits scroll as he and his wife sleep outdoors in the landscape of one of his dreams.

Indeed, the game's proposed desires are *all* frustrated or plainly denied: playing as Melanie, the game ends before the court case, granting no catharsis. Vinny never gets ahead and uniquely has no ending. Even Andrus' 'good' ending, coming up with the rent on time, is disappointing. Relieved that the week is over, Andrus explains to his cat that they have a bed and roof for another week, there is enough money to eat and "we are doing okay at work for now". Hard work in *Cart Life* grants no cathartic victory. Narrative aside, it is practically impossible to end with more money than one starts out with.

Conventionally, games as well as films and other popular media represent a converse progression. *Cart Life*'s intervention in capitalist ideological conventions is two-fold: as a system and as a branching narrative. As mentioned above, it focuses not on the abstract dynamic of money as points (as in *Gazillionaire*, *The Sims*) but on the necessity of work to survive – to serve other constraints such as food or addiction – while it discourages trivialities. The beer you buy for your character, the conversation with your cleaning lady or the cash you give to the beggar grant no rewards. They are solely a loss of time and money, harshly recounted at the end of the day and game (Figure 4). Regardless of how well you did, the game congratulates you, leading one user to comment:

> [I] got congratulated by the game for giving him [Andrus] the dream life of working 7 days a week for less money that he could get from welfare, getting harrassed [*sic*] by

[21] Andrus' Ukrainan poem, translated in the subtitles, ends on the hope of "somehow manag[ing] and, as scheduled, die". The peculiar use of 'scheduled' (instead of 'expected,' or 'inevitable') appears bureaucratic or protocolic in nature.

his landlord 10-20 times each day and probably dying pretty young from chain smoking and eating the same food every day. (spoilerspls, 2013)

Figure 4. "Congratulations on doing so well," (*Cart Life*, Richard Hofmeier, 2011)

The specific formulation of the game's end screen, "congratulations on doing so well with this character," may be read as an exceptionally hedged congratulation. Not merely did the player complete the game or do well: 'congratulations' do not cut it. Rather, the player did well "with this character" (2013). An unusually nuanced congratulation that I take to mean just that: you did well with this character, but not in general.

This is a vital realization, because this is in fact the best those characters can do. They are decidedly in a precarious, lower-class segment of the market. With little reliance on an education or on financial resources, the game's economic system is simulated from a hopeless perspective. As an economic system, *Cart Life*'s market furthermore simulates a capitalism that is essentially unfair for these workers. There is no social security, customers are impatient and will often leave. Profitable margins require you to operate at an absolute minimum of personal expenses.

The narrative furthermore supports this by subverting standard narrative conventions on economical precarity, such as the ideological convention of upward mobility. The so-called 'rags to

riches' convention entails that anyone with the will to do so may rise to a higher social or economic position. Historian Richard Weiss calls this capitalism's 'American myth of success:' an "ideology of success through mind-power" (195) that promises, through popular culture, that "every American child receives, as part of his birthright, the freedom to mold his own life" (3). This 'Horatio Alger' myth is expressed in a whole range of narratives showing a poor character work their way up to a position of financial security and happiness. We see this ideological narrative convention expressed in a whole range of cultural expressions: film (*Citizen Kane* [1941], *Rocky* [1976], *Slumdog Millionaire* [2008], etc.); literature (*Oliver Twist* [Dickens, 1837], *The Great Gatsby* [Fitzgerald, 1925], Harry *Potter* [Rowling, 1997], etc.); television (*Idols* [2001], *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* [1998], etc.) and a plethora of other media.[22]

It is, furthermore, notably central as a convention to all games that present gradual improvement of capability in an economic system. Such games include *Rags to Riches* (Keener, 1985), *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar North, 2008) or MMORPG *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004), which cultural scholar Scott Rettberg deemed a "convincing and detailed simulacrum of the process of becoming successful in capitalist society" (2008, 20). The point is not to render an exhaustive list, but to stress that the narrative is practically ubiquitous. Indeed, across media and specifically in digital games, the convention is seldom subverted as in *Cart Life*.[23]

By presenting market participation in a particularly uncompromising laissez-faire market as ultimately boring, frustrating and depressing, *Cart Life* renders a simulation of American capitalism as inescapably unfair. That does not mean, however, that other ideological conventions are not kept intact. Think of the social convention that mothers are caring, re-affirmed in Melanie's caring for her child. Despite the father's claim to custody, Melanie cares for Laura and business suffers, proving 'once again' that mothers are a problem on the market, distracted as they are by domestic urges!

Similarly, immigrants appear to 'just' be able to work harder and longer. The convention of immigrant work ethic is re-affirmed by the cleaning lady Sun Chi who is working night and day – whereas other characters frequently take breaks. More explicitly, Andrus' character description states that "his great work ethic means longer work days;" an affirmation of work ethic abroad that is barely different from stating that Bangladesh clothing manufacturers or Taiwanese electronics assemblers are after all 'just used to that kind of work/pay'.

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[22] A literal adaption of this ideological convention of success can be seen in those cultural expressions concerning the self-help industry, such as the audiobook *How To Attract Money: Harnessing the Prosperity Power of the Universal Law* (Coronado, 2009), written by Eddie Coronado: experienced lottery winner and Law of Attraction expert.

[23] A notable exception is the game *TuboFlex* (Molleindustria, 2003) that satirizes the unchanging fate of the permanent temporary worker (or 'perma-temp') that gets hired and fired for different menial jobs on a regular basis. Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter read it as part of a movement "contesting the increasingly precarious conditions of social life under Empire" (2009, 197).

1.4. CONCLUSION: POSSIBLE WORLDS, IDEOLOGICAL SYSTEMS

It is at this point, that I would like to return to my initial subquestion:

> How is game design, through the formal characteristics of the game, capable of proposing a model of a world in a way that is ideological?

As a working definition of ideology, I characterized it as a cultural world, organized through power along sets of quasi-natural conventions of which alternatives are erased. In parallel, I characterized digital games as capable of creating possible worlds, organized by an abstract auctorial instance (regardless of whether this instance corresponds to a single author or to a team of hundreds of designers). These possible worlds are immediate: they are presented in the here-and-now, constructed as if part of the player's present. In doing so, the auctorial instance presents a first step in the actualization of the virtual – an organization of this possible world in terms of a stylized simulation: rather than simulate a full reality, it offers specific affordances, constraints and desires.

This allows a reading of games' use of conventions: what affordances, constraints and desires are offered and which alternatives are offered? In the case of *Cart Life*, I opted to focus on two specific formal characteristics as stylistic limitations. These were its choice of characters and the occurrence of narrative events that cannot be influenced. Through these game design choices, *Cart Life*'s organization of its possible world re-affirms certain ideological conventions, but interestingly subverts others.

Significantly, it subverts the convention of upward mobility, offering little alternative to being moderately unsuccessful in the capitalist market. Success ranges from paying the rent for another week to finally accepting death as per schedule. Rather than emphasize, according to convention, the affordances offered by a non-intrusive government of laissez-faire economics, *Cart Life* shows the impossibility of improving one's economic status. It does so by modelling its affordances as minimal, barely allowing a profit, while constantly throwing up the constraints of hunger or addiction. Additionally, while it grants much weight and attention to its desires, these are structurally frustrated and lost in the margins of precarious, repetitive labour.

As such, games may be called a model of a world in a way that is ideological because they show their conventions as quasi-natural. If we consider the virtual as a 'possibility space' or potential, digital games move towards actuality in three steps: the game's design, the player's choice, the player's interpretation. Each step significantly limits the semantic space of the situation. If *Cart Life* had different limitations on its simulation it would offer different choices, or a broader palette of affordances, constraints and desires. In other words: as a stylized simulation, *Cart Life* differs from other simulations of economy in that its specific emphasis lies with the unfairness and every-day materiality of economy as a desperate way of making ends meet.

Hence, to answer my question, game design is capable, through its formal characteristics, of proposing a model of a world ideologically by offering, in a stylized simulation, conventions in a way that is paradigmatic for ideology. So far, then, games stand as an interesting model of ideologies precisely because they resemble ideologies as an organizing structure entered into, while at the same time serving as isolated test cases for alternatively organized ideological worlds. As such, they are relatively closed systems of choices granted through affordances, constraints and desires – affording autonomy only in so far as alternatives are recognized and afforded.

The reader might see a resemblance, here, in Salen & Zimmerman's definition of play as "the free space of movement within a more rigid structure" (2004, 304). The following chapter aims to focus on play. Digital games are, of course, by no means isolated systems. Rather than read them as formal objects of representation, games demand a consideration as systems of presentation requiring input. In other words, games require free movement of a player within its rigid structure affordances, constraints and desires. Throughout this chapter, I have attempted to generalize the structures offered by games with minimal recognition of the player. In the following chapter, I will consider the dialectical relationship between the game and player and further define the player subject within the context of the game-as-structure and ideology.

2. PRECARIOUS PLAY

> "I don't understand. How on earth are you making meaningful choices? What did you——*wait a second*. Did I just see, no that's not possible. I can't believe it. How had I not noticed it sooner? You're not Stanley. You're a real person!"
>
> – Narrator (*The Stanley Parable*, Galactic Café, 2013)

When the narrator of *The Stanley Parable* realizes that the plot he was laboriously narrating was all this time acted out by a human player behind a computer, he is suitably astonished. After all, digital games may depend on an audience able to act – but that player's actions are still limited by script. Why, then, can it seem even remotely astonishing that *The Stanley Parable* reflects on this lack of freedom? I propose that this is because of a fundamental tension in participatory media that games often wilfully ignore: while the promise of interactivity may be a promise of freedom, even the briefest contemplation shows us that the explorable options making up this freedom are limited and, perhaps more disillusioning, pre-programmed. Yet, grammatically speaking, games *seem* to be particularly first-person experiences. *I* might take pride in completing *America's Army*'s basic training, or gravely remember the moment I walked Martin Walker, in slow-motion, through desert dunes filled with hundreds of still-burning bodies in *Spec Ops: the Line* after a white phosphorus attack. But who is that *I*, and to what extent can I be, at once, the person playing a game as well as being Martin Walker, traversing the Dubai desert? How is this subject split and how do these subjectivities relate? In order to define the *I* of the digital game-playing subject, I ask:

What type of subject is constructed through the structures of digital game-play?

After a short introduction of my case study, providing a context and frame of reference for my research question, I will start by reiterating two traditions through which the gaming subject has frequently been theorized: an interpellationary and a deconstructivist model. Second, I will look at Miguel Sicart's attempt at bridging these two positions by describing a player-subject in a Foucaultian model of power relations that articulates how the game-as-structure brings into being a specific player-subject. I will, however, problematize Sicart's concept of the 'player-subject' as a unified, stable subject separate from the 'playing' self. My case study will serve partly as a counter-example, as *The Stanley Parable* thematizes reflection to address the difference between the playing subject and the avatar through which the player is present within the diegesis of the game. Finally, departing from Sicart's player-subject I will re-define the split subject of digital game-play on two bases. I will do so on the basis of, first, the phenomenological concept of 'presence,' which accounts for the continuum

of difference between our natural 'selves' and the embodiment of avatars. On the basis of Ernst van Alphen's ideological subject in language, I will further categorize the split subject of game-play in the third chapter. There, I turn to the ideological interplay between game and player in order to indicate the critical potential of digital game-play by enstranging its subjects.

2.1. CASE STUDY

First, however, a brief introduction of my case study is due. Galactic Café's *The Stanley Parable* was originally a modification of the first-person shooter *Half-Life 2* (Valve, 2004) and despite its recent release as a standalone game it still adopts this perspective. However, it introduces its eponymous character from a third-person perspective (as an other), specifically from the voyeuristic view of an office surveillance camera. Furthermore, the *Parable*'s narration forces a comparison between myself as a player and Stanley, introducing him as employee number 427, who "pushed buttons on the keyboard. Orders came to him through a monitor on his desk, telling him what buttons to push, how long to push them and in what order". The game having been released only on Windows and OS X operating systems, this situation mirrors the interface of the player. Indeed, after the introduction, the game expects me to copy Stanley's obedience: The narration continues stating that Stanley "got up from his desk and stepped out of his office," after which the player is able to do just that. Subsequently, the player is presented with two open doors, the narrator noting that Stanley "entered the door on his left" (Figure 5). Not following the game's linear narration leads to what game designer Clint Hocking coined as ludonarrative dissonance: the effect of "throwing the narrative and ludic elements of the work [a game] into opposition" (2007, 256). More colloquially: the 'story' of a game (in this case its narrator) asks the player to do something that does not fit its possible or even required behaviour. On the other hand, following the narrator's description quickly leads to a conflict between Stanley's knowledge as a diegetic character and my knowledge as a player informed by the narrator.

The game is a concatenation of such branching options resulting in a number of endings, each invariably reflecting on the nature of story in a game: even if the player seems to 'disregard' the narration, the choice made was expected. What results is an interplay between the player, the character Stanley and the surprised, disappointed or scheming character of the narrator. I will return to how the *Stanley Parable* sheds light on the subject of play below. The discussion involved, however, first requires the context of twenty years of game studies research.

Figure 5. Two Doors (The Stanley Parable, Galactic Café, 2013)

2.2. INTERPELLATION VERSUS DECONSTRUCTION

Writing in 1995, media scholar Ted Friedman is early to recognize a tendency among critics to understand the limitations of choice in digital games as paradigmatic for ideology. Even in the case of freely explorable environments and branching choices, "a hypertext model of 'interactive cinema' still does little to give the player a sense of real autonomy," indeed "the choices remain a limited set of pre-defined options" (1995, 79). The problem is not so much that we should expect games to be 'objective' or 'free from bias' as Friedman puts it – after all, "computer programs, like all texts, will always be ideological constructions" (81). The fear of those other critics is rather that the illusion of freedom promised by interactivity serves to veil the ideology of the program.

While Friedman cites columnist Jerry Pournelle, many other authors have followed comparable lines of reasoning. Media scholar Eggo Müller exemplifies this reasoning – while not, eventually, endorsing it – by summarizing it as such:

> …whereas the 'passive' viewer has the freedom to negotiate or resist the ideology of a program (as described in active audience theory), the interactive participant necessarily affirms the program's ideological stance. (Müller, 2009, 53)

By going along with the proposed behaviour of the system, by following the rules of the game, the naive player-subject necessarily follows the system's proposed world view, or so the argument goes.

Marxist academics Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter go so far as to say that interactivity "[rather] intensifies the sense of free will necessary for ideology to work really well. Players, of their own choice, rehearse socially stipulated subjectivities" (2009, 192).

We may recognize, in this line of reasoning, a presumed merger of the player and the diegetic character into a single, stable subject. Completely caught up in the illusion of agency, players lose themselves in the game-proposed roles as "consumer, commander, commanded, cyborg, criminal" and other such "subject positions" (ibid.). The process of this identification is theorized by Dyer-Witheford through Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation. The process of interpellation, as coined in Althusser's 1969 essay "Idéologie et Appareils idéologiques d'Etat" entails that ideological practice constitutes individuals as subjects (696) through a social practice of being 'hailed' or interpellated into specific subject positions (699). By being hailed as, say, a father, a hard-working labourer or a lawyer, we acquire our identities through ideology. An ideology that, additionally, has a material existence (695) in that the 'ideas' of a human subject exist in his actions (695-96). Any individual or collective idea of who we are is, according to Althusser's theoretical framework, a consequence of adopting, through material practice – in this case playing a digital game – "the subject position proposed for us by [societal] discourse" (Fiske, 1987, 53).

The reasoning is certainly appealing, but it is problematized by various factors. First – as mentioned above – it assumes a 'naive' player that is completely caught up in the illusion of the fictional role. In other words, the presumed merger of player and character disregards a cynical engagement with the game: aware of the propagandist agenda behind recruitment game *America's Army*, I am perfectly able to play for fun without being truly hailed as (American) soldier. Second, the type of "feedback loop between user and computer" that Friedman also recognized (1995, 73) is problematized by what media scholar Diane Carr recognizes as the dynamicity of digital games:

> ...if interpellation does happen during play, there is no reason to assume that the potential interpellations posed by these various systems would be cumulative. It seems just as likely that they might clash, or that they would be mutually affirming one moment but contradictory the next. For this reason an account of ideology in games that relied on a static model of interpellation would be unsatisfactory. (Carr, 2007)

Similarly, Carr suggests the subject position offered to the player-subject to be dynamic, "activated or dormant, taken up, dropped or ignored by a player from moment to moment," a position that fundamentally clashes with Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's assumption of the stable, ready-made roles that digital games offer for us to adopt.

We encounter a final problem to an interpellational model of digital play when returning to Friedman, who suggests that "the process of computer game playing" is exactly a revealing of "the inner relationships" of the simulation (1995, 82). In other words, "learning and winning […] a

computer game is a process of demystification: one succeeds by discovering how the software is put together" (ibid.). We find this school of thought continued in the work of psychologist Sherry Turkle (acknowledging the possibility for "simulation understanding," or, alternatively, "resignation" to and "rejection" of its underlying assumptions [1996, 71]); Ian Bogost (coining 'procedural literacy' as a similar process of recognizing the rhetorical gestures of simulations' processes [2007, 258]); and, notably, play scholar Joost Raessens, who aligns Friedman's demystification and similar processes of recognizing digital games' assumptions with the method of *déconstruction*:

> ...the method of interpretation that aims to bring to the foreground those elements that operate under the surface, but break through cracks in the text to disrupt its superficial functioning. (Raessens, 2005, 376)

While, on one hand, then, an interpellational model of gameplay assumes that players are 'hailed' completely into the subject position offered by immersive games; a deconstructivist model proposes that players are wholly detached critics that deconstruct games' systems as a quintessential way of engaging with and understanding them. As with every simplification of academic debate, these positions are necessarily exaggerated,[24] but I take them to be representative of two wholly alternative ways of theorizing the player-subject that make far-reaching assumptions about the distinction between players and the fictional worlds they interact with.

2.3. GAMES AS POWER STRUCTURES

The point of friction between these two models is their choice of emphasis. The interpellational model assumes the ideological-paradigmatic role of an ideal player, subsumed under the game as a ludic structure, and emphasizes this governing structure as one guiding the player uncritically through a finite number of pre-programmed choices. The deconstructivist model emphasizes, instead, a detached player-subject, unearthing the game's underlying rules as an object of analysis in order to interact with those rules (i.e. to play) successfully.

Rather than being mutually exclusive, the ideological-paradigmatic game-as-structure and the deconstructing player-as-subject are in a dialectical relationship, producing what Miguel Sicart terms

[24] We need only look at the caricatural positions used to describe the narratology-ludology debate, or the more recent procedurality-playcentrism debate: in the end it proves near impossible to point to any scholars wholly identified with one of these poles (cf. Frasca, 2003a; Lederle-Ensign, 2013). In the case of my 'deconstructivist' model, for example, Raessens nuances Friedman's absolute characterization of gameplay as demystifying by suggesting that a large number of players may be perfectly content "staying at the surface of the fiction [...] as opposed to the previous in-depth deconstruction" (Raessens 2005, 378).

the 'player-subject' within the game. Sicart argues that it is the relation *between* game and player that produces the player-subject. Although Sicart's interest lies mainly in articulating an *ethical* rather than an ideological player-subject, the way in which he does so is productive to answering my question. Sicart connects the game-as-object – as set of rules – to the player-subject by viewing the former as a power structure in a Foucaultian sense. Much like the way in which power structures are prerequisites for the subject, he argues, "the game as an object is a prerequisite for the being of the player" (2009, 67).

Sicart's player-subject is characterized by three properties which I will treat below, the last two of which I will problematize. First, as mentioned, Sicart's player-subject is produced in a process of voluntary subjectivization akin to Foucaultian power structures. This theoretical framework addresses the relationship between the game-as-structure and the player-subject, as well as providing a productive way of thinking the phenomenology of digital play as adopting and experiencing a temporary subjectivity. A second property of Sicart's player-subject is its status as a 'skin-subject,' whose relationship is unclear to other subjectivities – specifically to subjecthood outside of the game. This is related to the third property of Sicart's player-subject, which is its prerequisite of 'immersion,' a problematic term in the field of game studies that Sicart does not directly define.

"Playing a computer game," for Sicart, "is an act of subjectivization, a process that creates a subject connected to the rules of the game" (63). He uses the term subject in both Michel Foucault's meanings of the word: as "subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge" (Foucault, 2001, 331). How does this subjectivization process work in the context of digital games?

Once a player figures out the rules of a game, they know what their "actions in the game were supposed to be," allowing them to act on that knowledge (Sicart, 2009, 65). That is: playing involves acknowledging and obeying its rules. Sicart consequently argues "that when a player is immersed in this system, her behaviour is shaped by the game system, its rules and mechanics" (66). Inferred knowledge on that system produces the power relation that generates the subject's behaviour. This approach differs from the interpellational model above only in that the relation of the diegetic player-subject (while still undifferentiated from the played character) to the player as "a cultural and moral being" outside of the game is *voluntary* (63). Player-subjects evolve as test-cases: possibilities for players to perform other subjectivities.

Two reasons why Sicart uses Foucault in order to provide a framework to describe the relation between the player and the game are, first, that power and power structures for Foucault are not necessarily subject to negative or positive value statements, they merely exist; and, second, that "power structures are prerequisites for the subject" (67). For Foucault, power structures are enacted not so much in "such-or-such institution of power, or group, or elite, or class:" it is rather a technique or form (2001, 331). This "form of power […] categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity," making the individual into a subject (ibid.).

In "the Subject and Power," Foucault foregrounds the question of 'how' power is exercised in order to de-emphasize "questions of 'what' and 'why'" (337). Power "brings into play relations between individuals," and it is in these power *relations* ("and not power itself" [339]) that subjects are acted upon. Instead of "global, massive or diffused" power as entity, it is something exercised (put into action) on another: a power relation can only be articulated on the basis of an 'other' "recognized and maintained to the very end as a subject who acts" (340).

In the case of a player maintained as a subject capable of action within the set of rules offered up by the game, that power relation rests on the instrument of consent. On the basis of this instrumental role of consent, Sicart argues for the necessity of recognizing the voluntary nature of player-subjectivity – indeed, "the exercise of power can never do without [violence or consent], often both at the same time" (Foucault, 2001, p340-41). I would like to additionally draw attention to Foucault's use of the words 'conduct' (playing on (*se*) *conduire*, to lead/drive; as well as to conduct oneself, to behave) and 'government,' in the way that a political structure can govern as well as in the way "in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed" (341). A way to envision how games can function as rulesets generative of subjects is by thinking of them as governing or conducting those player-subjects, which "is to structure the possible field of action of others" (ibid.). Rather than violence (which I consider irrelevant to most cases of digital play) or voluntary contracts (which Sicart takes as defining in the case of digital play [2009, 68]), it is government that Foucault considers "the relationship proper to power" (Foucault, 2001, 341).

As a type of freely adopted governing institution, then, the power structure of a game's rules 'produces' a player-subject: "the game's ontological nature initially defines the ontological position of its subjects, the players, [in that it] establishes the starting point for the process of subjectivization that takes place in the act of playing a game" (68). The 'ontological nature' of a game is, for Sicart "as a system of rules that create and are experienced through game worlds" (47). Yet how does a system of rules produce a subject and define its initial ontological position?

Sicart approaches games as events akin to Badiou's *événement*: "an act of absolute truth that shatters the established knowledge" and, additionally, "an experience of delimited boundaries with a series of imperatives that have to be assumed in order to become a subject" (Sicart, 2009, 71). Thus, "faithful to those principles [the series of imperatives], the player as subject is created" (71). To Sicart, this eclectic combination of Badiou and Foucault shapes a player-subject that is necessarily faithful to the game's experience. As such, "games as objects can condition what the ethical practices and values of the players will be through their affordances and constraints" (102).

There are some problems with this process. The player-subject for Sicart is generated in a power structure, created as "a subset of our being as multiple subject" (73). But this subjecthood, particular to each game, assumes a faithfulness to the governing principles in order to *be*. It ends when the player stops playing or does not abide to the principles of play – in Sicart's terms, when it does not show fidelity to the game's "affordances and constraints" (102). In fact, "not being faithful to the rules

implies not being faithful to the event, and therefore losing the ontological status of subject" for Sicart (71). In his example, to stop playing a game like *Custer's Revenge* (Mystique, 1982), which features rape as its primary goal, is to "immediately suspend the player-subjectivity" and revert to one's "*own* personal and cultural values" (103, emphasis added). The example is one that rejects a moral perversion: the player-subject, which we might remember as a subset of "our being as multiple subject" (73), is rejected by "[the] cultural and moral being" (63) of which it is a subset. There is, for Sicart, an implicit super-subject: one's 'own' subject as an autonomous individual playing the game – made up of a set of personal and cultural values – that is, to Sicart, outside of the push and pull of power relations.

Granted, there is a certain porosity between Sicart's player-subject, generated by the power structure of the game, and the cultural and moral being of which it is a subset, but it is a one-way exchange. The subject that is playing the game informs the player-subject, in order to better "deduce the rules" of the structure players are subjects of (69). Elsewhere, Sicart redefines the "larger cultural being" of which the "player-subject is only a subset" as an agent "bringing [experience] into the game" (77). Their relation is further ill-defined: the player-subject is merely a "skin-subject in contact with the world outside the game, which in return does have influence over how a player experiences a certain game" (102).

Sicart uses the metaphor of the skin for the player-subject as a temporarily adopted virtual skin "that is both 'oneself' and 'other,' because it has a component of strangeness that puts the player in contact with the virtual world" (78). As such, playing becomes "putting on the player-skin and experiencing the world and the game world within it" (79). The metaphor of the skin "connects the internal, individual subjectivity of the player with the larger communitarian, cultural and historical subjectivities of the contemporary self" (ibid.).

Furthermore, Sicart's player-subject depends on the metaphor of immersion: only "when a player is immersed in this system, her behaviour is shaped by the game system" (66); and it is "the fact that the player is immersed in a ludic experience that creates the play-subject" (98). This metaphor was introduced by game scholar Janet Murray in 1997, "derived from the physical experience of being submerged in water" (98). It has been a trope in game studies since, but the metaphor has 'run wild' in a sense, extending, among other things, to a "psychological immers[ion]" (ibid.) that finds echoes in later broad uses as a type of emotional investment (Gerrig, 1998), any cognitive appropriation of a mental challenge (Björk and Holopainen 2005), a "suspension of disbelief," a "cerebral kind of involvement with the game" or a "meditation-like state–the Tetris trance" (Adams, 2004).

It is at least confusing that Sicart does not define immersion, extending it even to involvement with the cultural community of players (2009, 102). Especially considering how central immersion is as a prerequisite for the player-subject, it is difficult to see how the subjectivity offered by a digital game can be formulated as a phenomenological being, as a double existence of the body 'immersed,' or "tak[ing] place in the world of experiences both passively and actively" (78). Sicart draws from

philosopher Barbara Becker's understanding of the body-subject as "simultaneously an external being that can be experienced and an internal being that experiences other […] somewhere between a material object and a pure consciousness" (Becker, 2000, 363). He translates this body-subject into the player-subject by claiming that it "present[s] some qualities of embodiment," but he does not argue which and why. Sicart names the "complex and highly detailed process of avatar creation" in some games a "symptom of this fact," but not until game scholar Teun Dubbelman's dissertation, *Narratives of Being There* (2013), is the phenomenological turn in player subjectivity adequately argued.

What Sicart leaves us with is a relation between the game-as-structure and the player-as-subject wherein the game's formal set of rules governs the behaviour and ontology of a 'player-subject' through a process similar to Foucault's power relations. That concept of the player-subject is, however, unclearly based on the experience of immersion, an experience that is furthermore ill-defined in its relation to the player as a subject outside of the game – sometimes as another "subset of our being as multiple subject" (73), other times as a "larger cultural being," (77).

2.4. STANLEY DECIDES FOR HIMSELF NOW

I would like to return now, briefly, to subjecthood in *The Stanley Parable* as it provides a valuable reflection on Sicart's player-subject. Calling itself a *Parable* already implies some didactic nature: indeed the original release in 2007 (Galactic Café) was frequently described by its designers as "an experimental narrative-driven first person game […] an exploration of choice, freedom, storytelling and reality, all examined through the lens of what it means to play a video game" (Mod Db, 2011). The game, then, perhaps more than wanting to entertain, serves a critical purpose.

As introduced above, *the Stanley Parable* thematically foregrounds governance: the character Stanley is introduced as someone guided by orders, pushing buttons in servitude, and the player is ostensibly expected to do the same. Stanley epitomizes the first sense of Foucault's subject as someone "subject to someone else by control and dependence" (2001, 331), following each order, experiencing dread when the power relationship is suspended. Whereas before, "Stanley relished every moment that the orders came in, as though he had been made exactly for this job," suddenly "something very peculiar happened. Something that would forever change Stanley" (Galactic Café, 2013):

> He had been at his desk for nearly an hour when he realized that not one single order had arrived on the monitor for him to follow. No-one had shown up to give him instructions […] Something was very clearly wrong. Shocked, frozen solid, Stanley found himself unable to move for the longest time. But as he came to his wits and regained his senses, he got up from his desk and stepped out of his office. (ibid.)

At this point, the fictional subject Stanley ends, and the disembodied representation of Stanley – seen as an other, represented in the there-and-then the way we see actors in film – turns into an embodied presentation: we take Stanley's perspective and control him in the here-and-now. As those last words of narration are heard ("he got up from his desk and stepped out of his office"), we have little choice but to follow those orders ourselves – that is, to subject ourselves to the same power relationship with the narration (as an aspect of the game's design) that Stanley was in. When I say "we have little choice" that means we have some choices: we may choose to stand around in office 427 and possibly look around; we may choose to quit the game; or we may choose to follow the narration.

Quitting the game at this point, refusing to play, suspends the 'player-subject' of the *The Stanley Parable*. Refusing what philosopher Bernard Suits calls the "lusory attitude," the playful attitude to submit to "games [as] rule-governed activities," means that "it is not possible to play a game" (1978, 35). Alternatively, the term ludic *contract* is employed as an agreement, similar to Suits' lusory attitude, "on the part of players that they will forgo some of their agency in order to experience an activity that they enjoy;" which is, according to game design scholar Charles J. Pratt, a case of "adopting an ideology more than a set of abstract rules" (2010). Pratt's example is that of *Bioshock* (2K Games, 2007), whose ludic contract Clint Hocking describes as "seek power and you will progress" (2007, 256). To refuse that ideology is to refuse the ludic contract, is not to play. In other words, not playing means refusing the 'initial ontological position' of the 'player-subject' for Sicart (2009, 69).

If we do allow the player-subject to be created by submitting to the rules of the game, *The Stanley Parable*'s branching narrative forces us to acknowledge a difference between the 'skin' we are adopting (i.e. that of Stanley) and ourselves as controllers of that skin. This problematizes Sicart's skin-subject as entirely subsumed under the 'multiple subject' of the player: characters like Stanley have a determinate background story, a gender, a visual representation and so on. Even in a game such as the *Parable* where all the choices are made by a player who does not relinquish this control (as we will see in *Spec Ops: the Line*, and can acknowledge in any game employing cinematic cut scenes), there is a split between the character *played* and the subject *playing*. *The Stanley Parable* plays on this, for example when suggesting the player quit the game in order to save Stanley from dying in a large crushing machine; or when acknowledging, as cited in the introductory citation, that Stanley is someone fundamentally different from the player, but instead "a real person" (2013). This rhetoric is underlined visually under certain conditions, when another ending has been completed first. Reaching the area with the two doors again, the player will 'leave' Stanley both in terms of control and of perspective – leaving him ungoverned and motionless (Figure 6). As the credits roll, the narrator worries about Stanley's inability to act, unable to decide for himself.

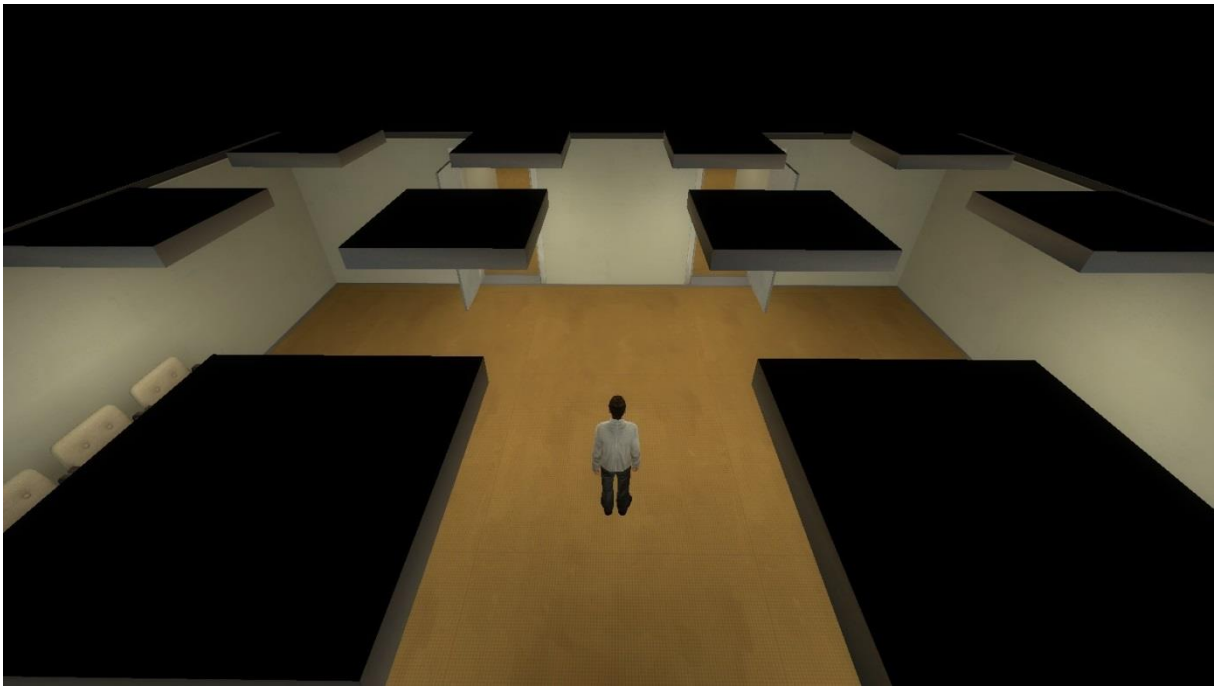

Figure 6. Third person (*The Stanley Parable*, Galactic Café, 2013)

2.5. SUBJECTS OF PRESENCE

Leaving Stanley behind, as a skin or avatar previously inhabited, stresses the changeable nature of players' presence in games. In order to address this presence, I turn from Sicart to Dubbelman, doing so for two reasons. First of all, I turn to Dubbelman's concept of presence because it allows me to theorize more elaborately how different configurations of (dis)embodied presence connect what Sicart called the diegetic player-subject to the 'every-day' experience of the *playing* subject outside of the game. In other words, through presence I am able to describe the distinction between digital games' 'Stanley' and myself as a player behind the keyboard. A second reason is that a clear definition of presence replaces the overdetermined term 'immersion' as a way for "media users to feel physically present in the stories and fictional worlds expressed" (2013, 227). I will start out by defining presence as a crucial term necessary to describe the connection between a playing subject and the game. After that, I will argue that the concept of presence sheds light on the difference between player and character as a variable identification that differs across genres and moments of play. To do this, I shall trace how presence accounts for the continuum of difference between our natural 'selves' and our avatars; second, I shall look at ways in which formal game design elements may affect this difference between the two.

Presence is "the feeling or fact of being present to something" (2). *Mediated* presence is of course in need of some elaboration. An intuitive, but admittedly narrow, example of mediated presence would be that of virtual reality environments: consider the stereoscopic virtual reality headset *Oculus Rift*, currently in development, which early testers report grants "spatial perception – the fact that you are in a space where there is depth" (EDGE, 2014, 73). Such a narrow idea of presence is

based on what Dubbelman calls a 'logic of mimesis:' "the idea that spatial presence in essence derives from the illusion of non-mediation," (25). Dubbelman's phenomenological – rather than mimetic – approach to presence allows a recognition of mediated presence that deviates from natural perception (27). Phenomenological media theory 'externalizes perception,' by stating that "our perceptual mechanism does not reside in the [embodied mind] but somewhere in-between our [embodied mind] and our environment" (33). Central is the concept of intentionality, making perceived phenomena (including the perception of mediated presence) "a shared construct of our perceptual faculties and an object towards which our perceptual faculties are intentionally directed," regardless of whether that object is 'real' or imaginary; everyday or unmediated (ibid.). Hence, media expand natural perception by my directing attention to it in order to perceive, leading media psychologists Wijnand IJsselsteijn and Giuseppe Riva to remark that, "as a user experience, the feeling of 'being there,' or presence, is not intrinsically bound to any specific technology–it is a product of the mind" (2003, 5).

Rather than *degrees* of presence – more or less resembling the 'natural' perception of everyday life – this phenomenological approach leads Dubbelman to formulate unhierarchized different *forms* of presence, in that "Media stimulate and enhance our bodily senses in particular ways [making] us see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and position in ways impossible without the intervention of these media" (Dubbelman, 2013, 47). As a consequence,

> ...it becomes 'natural' to us to temporarily engage the perceived world in another manner. In short, media produce […] different ways of perceiving the world around us and our own position in it: other ways of being-in-the-world, to use phenomenological terminology. (ibid.)

An example that, for me, underlines the delimiting nature of perception as a 'being-in-the-world' is Deleuze's description of the perceptual world of ticks. In Parnet's interviews *L'Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze* he relates an impression of the perceptional world of ticks: from a forest full of life it extracts only simple sensations of light, smell and touch that shape its world (1996) – would a simulation of a tick's life not be perfectly suitable as a digital game experience? A tick climbs the tree, waits for the light to change, smells the victim, drops, feels the victim, latches onto it. Mission complete.[25]

The reason I find Dubbelman's phenomenological concept of mediated presence furthermore preferable to definitions of immersion in the case of digital games is because it bypasses the binary

[25] A similar game concept has been released under the name Mister Mosquito for Playstation 2 (ZOOM Inc., 2002), in which the player flies around the room as a mosquito, keeping track of the amount of blood sucked from its victim and its amount of stress. Arguably, the player's perception is limited to those senses: sight, blood level and stress level.

difference between immersion and distantiation that is so necessary to uphold a difference between purely interpellational and deconstructivist models of gameplay. One can be absolutely convinced of the fictional world yet not be present; just as one can be present in the game but distantiated from its events. For example, one can be immersed in Tolkien's Middle Earth, but nonetheless lack presence while reading *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954); just as one may feel distantiated from the goings on in *SimCity* (1989), yet be variably present – relating, acting and overseeing – in the world as disembodied mayor, city planner, real estate developer and so on. Secondly, I prefer the use of presence, in this case, because of its specific phenomenological account of digital play: the ability of digital games to render players experientially present, "anchored to one location in space and time" (227). Whereas a cinematic or literary world is *witnessed*, digital games allow players to *experience* a fictional world as part of it. Using a theatrical analogy, digital games grant us the unique ability not just to be on stage, but to wander around the scenery and freely interact with its actors.

Importantly, Dubbelman distinguishes between embodied and disembodied presence: where the former is 'prosthetic' as if it were an artificial extension of the body, the latter gives players control over an external body of an 'other' (126). Hence the difference between an avatar as "an external object to look at" versus "an embodied position to look from" (103) – the 'skin' as object and the 'skin-subject' playing, respectively. An intuitive example is that of camera use, where "the first-person camera allows the player to think of the avatar as 'me,'" as opposed to the third-person camera's 'him' or 'her' (99). I may think of playing, again, *America's Army*, in terms of myself enacting the role of American soldier, whereas the experience of playing *Spec Ops: the Line* or *The Stanley Parable* entails controlling Cpt. Martin Walker or Stanley: the third person camera establishes Stanley as an 'other'. As I will argue below, game design elements (such as camera placement or an elaborate backstory for the avatar you are controlling) may create a certain disidentification – or, in terms of presence, a reduction of the impression that players *themselves* are physically present in the fictional world as 'player-subject'.

The avatar, then, has a "double status" as both prosthetic point-of-view and external controlled object, allowing it to either "mimic [or] defer from 'natural' embodiment," (103) similar to Becker's body-subject. But this closeness *or* distance to everyday experience and personhood is variable and, for Dubbelman and those scholars his research is based on, furthermore a matter of design. What this adds, first and foremost, onto ontological claims of what games are (as power structures) or how players become subjects through them (by accepting games' affordances and constraints) is a terminology by which to indicate those formal properties of games by which the player 'acts' the character. Furthermore, it indicates a spectrum of identification that brings further into focus the continuum of difference between the interpreting subject outside of the game, the playing subject controlling the avatar and the played avatar represented:

> Computer games design the relationship between the player [and the] avatar in various ways. At one end of the spectrum, we find the subjective avatar of embodied presence (i.e. the avatar as anchored location to look from), while at the other end, we find the objective avatar of disembodied presence (i.e. the avatar as external object to look at). (Dubbelman, 2013, 104)

Besides a critical reworking of phenomenological Presence Theory for participatory media, Dubbelman does a thorough job of addressing some of the different game design configurations that may produce and affect presence. For instance, a 'dual-locus' configuration splits the played subject across two [*duo*] places [*loci*]. One of these being an objective avatar that is controlled in order to navigate the world and interact with other objects and characters. Another being the visual-perceptual subject-position through which the player beholds (from a disembodied position hovering freely around) their avatar as a played (in the sense of 'controlled') object in the world (110-13).

This specific configuration is elucidative as it lies between the poles of first-person and third-person configurations. Straightforwardly embodied first-person configuration entails a full correspondence between the place and orientation of the player with that of the character as in natural perception, as in first-person games such as *The Stanley Parable* or *America's Army.* Conversely, in the entirely disconnected third-person configuration, players' orientation and place are fully segregated and the player lacks control over one or both of these, as in the case of any cut-scenes, [26] quick-time events,[27] or, more concretely, *Heavy Rain*'s independent ('cinematic') camera (Quantic Dream 2010). It is perhaps confusing, but important to note, that Dubbelman's use of 'third-person configuration' is distinct from 'third-person camera' (2013, 125). He categorizes as 'semi-first person' or 'dual-locus' what might colloquially be named third person play – e.g. in the phrase "Tomb Raider is a first-person shooter" (Schleiner 2001, 222) – whereas Dubbelman's category of 'third-person configuration' denotes a "player's subjective point-of-view [entirely] detached from the objective avatar's body" (cf. Dubbelman 2013, 118).

The dual-locus configuration is additionally interesting because it presents a shared control over what is traditionally a mode of story-telling: the "visual narrator" of cinema (Verstraten, 2006, 16-17).

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[26] Cut-scene is a term frequently used to describe the film-like interruptions of game-play that serve as exposition without allowing the player's input. In Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska's words, cut-scenes are short "audiovisual sequences in which the player usually performs the role of more *detached observer* than is the case in the more active periods of gameplay. Many games use cut-scenes to establish the initial setting and background storyline" (2002, 11).

[27] A quick-time event is similar to a cut-scene, but one with "a prompt [to push a button displayed on-screen] that forces the player to make a split- second action or suffer usually painful or fatal consequences" (Rogers, 2010, 183).

The visual narrator is an organizing instance that expresses itself through camera shots as external focalizer or, when it aligns itself with an intradiegetic character, as an internal focalizer. A dual-locus configuration puts this task of controlling the camera and indeed of focalization fully in the hands of the player. Still, it is valuable to recognize the camera as apart from the avatar despite the player's control over both.

First of all, we must recognize a difference between the two across configurations. A clear example of this is the game *Resident Evil 3: Nemesis* (Capcom, 1999), a survival horror game where the player controls Special Tactics And Rescue Service (STARS) member Jill Valentine, heavily outnumbered by zombies in fictional Raccoon City. While the game grants the player disembodied presence as the avatar Jill, its static camera angels act as a classical visual narrator. While players lead their avatar through the city, the visual narrator adopts a fixed camera perspective in a pre-determined corner of each room, lurking at the player or slowly following them with its gaze. By contrast, opening doors causes a temporary shift in visual narration to a point-of-view shot aligned with the focalizer – what Dubbelman calls an embodied "first-person avatarial configuration" (2013, 104).

Second of all, games may variably give or take control over each separately in certain situations. *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune* (Naughty Dog, 2007) is a good example of this. Navigating Nathan Drake through the Amazon jungle, the camera usually acts as a cinematic visual narrator: it points in a direction that progresses the narrative, indicating important objects and so on. Whilst action-packed scenes that demand 360 degrees of attention – ambushes, for example – grant the player full control over the camera in a dual-locus configuration; cinematic cut-scenes introduce a more autonomous visual narrator – employing cuts, reverse shots and other filmic techniques. More importantly, these same cut scenes show a similar precariousness of the player's control over the avatar: while control over the camera is often relinquished, cut-scenes also temporarily take away the player's control over the avatar.

The dual-locus configuration is critically relevant because it establishes a clearly variable (dis)embodiedness: although the played subject is present as both camera and avatar, they constantly play through a spatial distance to and difference with the external avatar. As such, the avatar opens up the possibility of gaining its own identity. For this reason the dual-locus configuration is dominant in such games such as *Tomb Raider* (Eidos 1996), *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune* and *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar San Diego 2010). Each of these examples leaves a clearly identifiable and unambiguous distinction between the avatar as a strong narrative character and the player as their 'puppet-master'. Hence, I accept *Tomb Raider*'s Lara Croft to have a background story; *Uncharted*'s Nathan Drake to take decisions in cinematic interludes that I would not take myself; and even for *Red Dead*'s John Marston to die – for him to be replaced by his son as successive avatar.

The point, of course, is that there lies a possibility of disidentification in the distinction that some games create between the player (as playing actor and interpreting audience) and the avatar (as the in-game representation of the played character). A game that would stay hypothetically and

consistently within the first-person configuration (thereby never revoking my agency) cannot principally have me do things I do not want to do. However, most other configurations along the continuum will break my absolute embodied presence at some point. The possibility for such moments are varied, and I will discuss the example of Yager Development's *Spec Ops: the Line* (2012) in my third chapter when I discuss the particular way in which it emphasizes the distinction between interpreting, playing and played subjects (roughly audience, actor and character) in the context of videogames. First, however, I would like to return to the question of this distinction. What characterizes the distinction between player and character?

Based on the above, we may conclude that this distinction is variable and that it is in part dependent on the production of presence through formal properties of the game: i.e. coded rules pertaining to the player's influence on point-of-view and control of the avatar. As such, a point-of-view and means to navigate the avatar that coincide more with each other and are more akin to 'natural' (i.e. everyday) bodily perception leave a *minimum* of difference between the player (as playing actor and interpreting audience) and the avatar (as the in-game representation of the played character). Conversely, a disconnected point-of-view and means to navigate the avatar leads to a greater distinction between the player and character.

Additionally, we may add that this co-incidence of player and avatar affects identification, provided that we follow Dubbelman's phenomenological argument that perception and physical position are determined by the inclination and affordance to act inherent to the environment (100-01). As such, when we relinquish our possibility to act (as in cinematic interruptions) or see our intentions represented by the actions of an other (as in the dual-locus configuration) our presence gives way to that of another that is not us. I argue that the greater this distinction is between player and character, the less we align with the representation, goals and actions of the 'skin' we control.

Two elaborate and polarized formulations for clarity: I identify more in the case of a first-person configuration – a case perspective *and* agency – in which I never relinquish control and where my character has no dialogue, as in *The Stanley Parable*; than in the case of a third-person configuration frequently interrupted by cut-scenes where my character has a voice, motive, background and gender (etc.) that are not mine, as in *Cart Life*. In each case it is important to maintain that there is a stronger co-incidence between the player's diegetic presence and the character controlled, as a skin or other type of representation. Concisely, then, the continuum of difference between player and character is characterized by a wide scale of formal properties that varyingly identifies the player with or differentiates them from their in-game representation. Both the interpellational model as well as Sicart's theory of the player-subject do not account for this difference.

2.6. CONCLUSION: THE SUBJECT OF PLAY

It is useful to stop, here, and return to my research question regarding the type of ideological subject that is constructed through digital game-play. I have looked over the ways in which two schools of game scholars have presented the relation between the game as a governing structure and the player as a subject, naming these schools of thought 'interpellational' and 'deconstructivist'. Where the former assumes a player-subject fully subsumed under the game's proposed subjectivity; the latter assumes a subject fully apart from the game as an object, analyzing its rules in order to play. In retrospect, we might say that the interpellational model focuses on a playing subject identified entirely with a played subject; whereas the deconstructivist model focuses on an interpreting subject interacting with the game as object (or the 'subject matter' of the interpreted subject).

Sicart breaks these mutually exclusive lines of reasoning by proposing a player-subject that is created by the game as a 'skin-subject,' one that adopts the avatar of the game as a skin in order to perceive the game, in which this player-subject acts according to the power structure of the game's rules. This player-subject has an ambiguously defined relation to the player outside of the game, of which it is either a subset among multiple subjectivities, or the temporary subset of one greater moral being. Additionally, Sicart's skin-subject ignores the represented identity of many avatar 'skins,' focusing instead on the process of avatar creation in some games as a symptom of the skin-subject's embodiment.

It is only through Teun Dubbelman's concept of mediated presence that the relations between the character, the player inside and the player outside of the game can be theorized. Reasoning from a phenomenological approach to the sensation of 'presence' (feeling spatiotemporally present to perceived objects around us), the mediated presence of being in a game is taken to be a different type of perception, delimited by the senses offered to us by the mediatized expression. This presence is furthermore subject to different configurations: we may be embodied in a first-person configuration, controlling and viewing from a virtual place as if we were looking out of another set of eyes; or we may be disembodied, present at once as a viewpoint and as an avatar we look down upon as we control him, her or it.

The ideological subject of play is thus one that is essentially 'split' across the process of actualization discussed in the first chapter. Game-players are afforded control over this process by being granted presence through control over the avatar and camera. At the same time, this control is both precarious and constrained. Within the limited configuration of this presence, control over the avatar and camera may be relinquished to a (cinematic) narrator. The specific configurations and presented content of *The Stanley Parable* comment on that split between the player as an audience; the player as an actor and the player as precarious character: a subject not securely held, equally subject to narration as other presented content.

In my third chapter, I will further categorize the split of the player-subject across these three subjectivities: the interpreting audience of a ludoliterate natural body of everyday presence; the actor

of the playing subject within the power structure of a game's stylized simulation; and the character of the played subject as a disembodied avatar of the possible world. Doing so, I will argue that digital games carry a critical potential that is to be found in situations of enstrangement.

3. ENSTRANGED PLAY

> "The functional relationship between stage and public, text and performance, producer and actors, remained almost unchanged. Epic theatre takes as its starting point the attempt to introduce fundamental change into these relationships. For its public, the stage is no longer 'the planks which signify the world' (in other words, a *magic circle*), but a convenient public exhibition area."
>
> – Walter Benjamin ("What is Epic Theatre?" [First version], 1966, 2)

> "How many Americans have you killed today?"
> "Do you feel like a hero yet?"
>
> – Loading Screen (*Spec Ops: the Line*, Yager Development, 2012)

Thus far, I have addressed the similarities between digital game-play and ideologies. In this chapter, I argue that this structure may have a critical potential. I ask:

> How may the dialectical relationship between the game as ideological system and the player as split subject provoke a reflection on ideological conventions?

By further developing the split subject of game-play based on Ernst van Alphen's categorization of ideological subjects in language, I argue that there is a counter-hegemonic potential to digital games in proposing their own ideologies. By addressing their conventional nature as ideological-paradigmatic models, game-play may instead 'enstrange' the player from their position within ludic power structures. To develop my argument, I will first develop a scheme by which the interpreting, playing and played subjects can be separately recognized as roughly the functions of audience, actor and character and are placed within the steps of actualization articulated in the first chapter. Second, I argue that *Spec Ops* plays on this separation to produce so-called enstrangement [*Verfremdung*]. Third, by comparison to Brechtian theatrical performance, I argue that an enstrangement may act to explicate the precarious nature of their connection. I will conclude by reconnecting spect-actorial enstrangement to games by arguing that games such as *Spec Ops: the Line* use this type of enstrangement to reflect on ideology. In effect, I argue that this enstrangement serves to reveal the material conditions and social injustices of the world outside of the game's possible world as quasi-natural ideological conventions. Before I do so, I will again introduce a case study.

Figure 7. Opening menu (*Spec Ops: the Line*, Yager Development, 2012).

3.1. CASE STUDY

Yager Development's *Spec Ops: the Line* (2012), released on Windows, OS X, Playstation 3 and Xbox 360, is a third-person shooter designed to criticize and finally subvert the conventions of its genre. Its opening menu, in which the player chooses to alter options, start a new game or continue a saved game starts out with the view of an upside-down American flag and Jimi Hendrix' *Star Spangled Banner* (1971) playing in the background (Figure 7). A flag upside-down is either a sign of distress of disrespect; Jimi Hendrix' rendition of the U.S. national anthem was at once a tribute as well as a counter-cultural classic, delivered at the famous Woodstock festival. While these ambiguous elements seem at first to be dissonant with the unconditional patriotic allegiance of conventional (simulated or, presumably real-world) soldierhood; the game's narrative develops to establish a contrary stance.

Spec Ops connects to the previous case study in that it thematizes reflection in a more literal sense than *The Stanley Parable* did. Presenting itself, first, as a generic shooter, the player is increasingly confronted with the immorality of actions performed in-game. It does so literally through reflections of the avatar on glass; it reflects on the player's actions through lines of text, as in the introductory citation, while loading the game; and it does so in dialogues with other characters. By doing so, the game stresses a difference between the playing subject and the played avatar, Cpt. Martin Walker, while it criticizes military shooters' familiarized genre conventions such as American exceptionalism and military glorification.

By design, the game sheds light on the split nature of the ideological subject as constructed in and through computer games. As my close-reading will show, the game demands a disentanglement of the separate subject positions in game-play by frustrating their stable unity.

3.2. THE SPLIT SUBJECT

In the previous chapter I have treated the mediated presence that establishes a difference between (or co-incidence of) player and character. Doing so, I worked further towards a concept of the subject created through play. It is a subject partly created in the power structure of a game's world, which is shaped through the clearly delimited perception of presence granted by a game. It is, furthermore, a subject with a variable but distinguished relation to the subject outside of the game. As a whole: a subject within which we may distinguish the subject behind the computer (what *the Stanley Parable*'s narrator called "a real person"), a subject present and acting within the game under its lusory attitude and a subject that is controlled and has its own representation (e.g. Andrus, Stanley or Martin Walker).

I will argue for a recognition of this player-subject as the split subject of the external 'interpreting subject' behind the computer; the 'playing subject' in a mediated presence of the game; and the 'played subject' or 'interpreted subject' which we control, to which we relinquish control in the case of cinematic interludes.

I base these subject positions within the multi-subject of the player on Ernst van Alphen's analytical distinction between three linguistic subjects, which I treat as a travelling concept. i.e. As a concept that travels from one discipline to another, and during this journey does not stay unaltered (Bal, 2002, 28). Van Alphen introduces the speaking, interpreting and interpreted subject (1987, 28). The speaking subject is a "spokesman of a text, the implicit or explicit 'I' that expresses [its] signs" (ibid.)[28] – the narrator in literature or cinema. The interpreting subject 'interprets' in the sense that "it constrains the possible significations" of a text – the reader, or, within a text and within narratology, the focalizer, or the instance whose position readers align themselves with (28-29).[29] The interpreted subject can be the theme, the subject of the text in the sense of its *topic*, or a character (29).[30] Cultural theorist Mieke Bal, whose terminology van Alphen bases himself on, differentiates in her *Narratology* (1985) between the "abstract *actor* and the more specific term *character*," where the latter is rather an anthropomorphic figure: "more often than not a character resembles a human being and an actor need

[28] "de woordvoerder van een tekst, de impliciete of expliciete 'ik' die de tekens uit" (van Alphen, 1987, 28).
[29] "Het interpreterend subject is die instantie die de mogelijke betekenissen inperkt. In de verteltheorie wordt dit aspect de *focalisator* genoemd (Bal 1985). Dit is de instantie door wiens ogen we als lezer meekijken" (van Alphen, 1987, 28-29).
[30] "Het geïnterpreteerde subject kan het thema, het *onderwerp* van de tekst maar ook een personage zijn" (van Alphen, 1987, 29).

not necessarily do so" (114). I will leave this specification aside for now, rather moving on to an elaboration of these three subjects: the interpreting, speaking and interpreted subjects of van Alphen.

The *interpreting subject* of ideology for van Alphen can be located in a reader or decoder, who must realize his historical context, i.e. those interpreting subject uses codes from social or ideological conventions. The interpreting subject is the aspect of the text or communicative situation that constrains the possibilities of signification (55).[31] For instance, in the case of reception studies, the interpreting subject is a reader; in the case of textual analysis or close-reading, it is the focalizer who (within the text as semiotic system) constrains the possible meanings of the text (ibid.). 'Codes,' here, are specific rules that correlate signs with conventional significations, including linguistic conventions (e.g. syntactical Subject-Verb-Object order), reading conventions (e.g. "reading prose from sentence to sentence and poetry from line to line" [42]), genre conventions (e.g. the final girl who defeats or gets away from the antagonist in slasher horror), social conventions (girls wear pink; boys wear blue) and so on (42-42). When a code can be considered natural or quasi-natural it may be called ideological (44), as I have also proposed in my working definition of ideology.

When stating that the interpreting subject in the case of the digital player constrains the possible significations of a text, through codes, the knowledge of these codes is akin to a 'ludoliteracy,' a familiarity with the coded conventions of (digital) play (cf. Zagal, 2010, 23). Based on the knowledge of these conventions, playful situations are understood in the same sense that texts are understood: through knowledge of earlier play. The interpreting subject's knowledge of other games necessarily informs the playing subject in order to recognize such conventions as health bars, genres and so on. As Sicart relates: "as a cultural being that has been playing games since a very early age I have developed a repertoire that allows me to identify patterns of rules and apply them" in order to understand "what my actions in the game" as a playing subject "were supposed to be" (2009, 65).

As for the *playing subject*, it is problematic to apply the speaking subject or narrator directly to either the game, as stylized simulation of a possible world, or the choices made by the players within that world. Within the rules of the designed game-as-structure, the playing subject 'speaks'. In other words: the playing subject is the implicit *I* that produces the signs of an ergodic text, causing the expression of game's code – here, in the concrete sense of programming and as the coded conventions to be (re-)interpreted by the interpreting subject.

There is, then, already a dialectic emerging between them: the ludoliterate interpreting subject reads the codes of the game, informing the choices as a playing subject, thus actualizing the game through play. In turn, those choices change the state of the game, leading to a re-interpretation, a

[31] "het interpreterend subject [is] dat aspect van de tekst of van de communicatiesituatie dat de vele betekenismogelijkheden inperkt" (van Alphen, 55).

further actualization and so on. An example: as a moderately literate player I know that there is a convention regarding 'bosses'. Depending on certain presentations by the auctorial instance (a change of music, a large health bar on screen) and the size of an enemy, I might interpret it as a 'boss' character. From my knowledge on the convention of the 'Rule of Three,' I decide I must hit it three times in order to finish it and move on.[32] When playing, I further actualize this situation from the one presented by the game by acting the part: I direct my avatar (the played subject) to hit it. If, after the third hit, the boss does not go down, my interpretation will have proven false: the possible world of this game does not abide to that particular convention. In turn, then, I re-interpret the situation as an interpreting subject and, as a playing subject, act accordingly. In my first chapter, I have called this a second step of the actualization of the game: the first step is rather an actualization by the auctorial instance, i.e. "the auctorial instance's […] organization of the aesthetic object *before* the players' choices" (29). Within this organization, the playing subject may act as afforded and constrained by the possible world of the game. This play within the "free space of movement within [the] more rigid structure" of a game is a second actualization: it further determines the product of game-play (Figure 8).

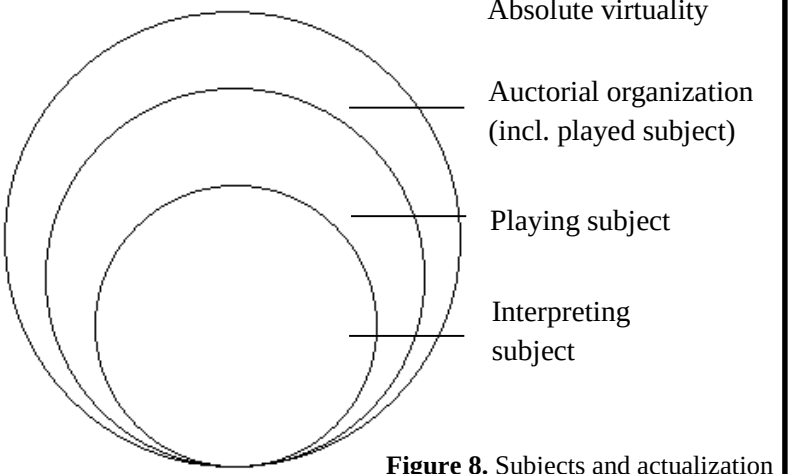

Figure 8. Subjects and actualization

This second step of actualization by the playing subject functions, as I wrote above, to produce the signs of an 'ergodic text'. An ergodic text is one that requires "non-trivial effort […] to traverse the text," a neologism from *ergon* (work) and *hodos* (path) (Aarseth, 1997, 1). That is to say, the playing subject exerts non-trivial effort on interactive texts, digital games and so on by navigating its possible world in the broadest sense – for the sake of comparison: the trivial effort of a 'nonergodic' text is flipping pages, moving eyes across a page and so on (Aarseth, 1997, 1-2). In other words, the function of speaking (or expression) in the case of digital games is shared by the playing subject (of the multi-

[32] Gaming website *Giantbomb.com* refers to the Rule of Three, defining it as such: "The Rule of Three dictates that a certain action must be repeated three times, usually when fighting a boss battle, in order to complete an objective" ("Rule of Three – (Concept)," 2014).

subject of myself as a player) and the game's auctorial instance in a two-step actualization. Insofar as interpretation is only possible *after* expression, the playing subject and the auctorial organization are at the basis of digital game-play's speaking subject – presenting the codes for interpretation. Only through interaction of the playing subject speaking *with* the code does game-play come to expression – using the term interaction not as 'participation' by the player (Raessens, 2005, 379-380), but exactly in the sense of *inter-* (between, among) and *āctiō* (acting, speaking, conducting): speaking or action between each other ["inter-" and "action," *OED Online*, 2014]).

The *interpreted subject*, for, van Alphen is equivalent to the socially constructed meaning of a text (1987, 57), which I take to be as constructed or understood by the interpreting subject through the (ideological) codes known by the interpreting subject.[33] In one instance, van Alphen gives characters within the text (in the shape of represented, fictional, subjects) as a type of interpreted subject within linguistic structures (29); another example is that of the subject *matter* of the text, its 'theme,' 'substance,' meaning or signification (58).[34] The state of this subject is ambiguous, even for van Alphen: it can only be called a subject in a vision of semiosis that takes the text as the origin of meaning as opposed to the *result* of meaning (in a more Barthesian sense). Alternatively, then, the interpreted subject is rather an object (29): the presented content offered by the auctorial organization of the game.

I choose, rather, to make the distinction of the interpreted subject as the fictional subject represented in the game, which is malleable and controllable by the playing subject but nonetheless designed and essentially unchangeable. This played subject is that of the avatar representing a character (Lara Croft, Nathan Drake, Martin Walker); the avatar and camera of third-person configurations whom we lose control over – who acts, in other words, as a cinematic subject or visual narrator: not interpreting, not playing, but to be played and interpreted.

The interpreted subject is, within the current field of game studies, a matter of discussion. As touched upon in my methodology, a recent paper by Sicart, "Against Procedurality," debates the premise of a 'proceduralist' school of reasoning (associated primarily with Ian Bogost) that there is an identifiable, 'intended' meaning to games formally (2011). The claim, especially made in the cases of short, political 'serious games' with explicit rhetorics (occasionally accompanied with paratexts *explaining* these rhetorics), assumes that playing is, to an extent, deconstructing the intended message of the game in a line of reasoning according to the deconstructivist model discussed above. Sicart, in what I interpreted as a 'Barthesian moment' in game studies counters this claim by arguing that play is

[33] " De sociale betekenis […] van een tekst is nu het ' geïnterpreteerde subject' zoals dat door de toepassing van al dan niet ideologische codes tot stand gekomen is" (van Alphen, 1987, 57).
[34] My translation of "het *onderwerp* van de tekst, zijn 'thema', 'stof' of 'betekenis' (van Alphen, 1987, 58).

essentially creative and expressive of meaning, and that the claim for an intended message is not just totalitarian but implausible in the case of open-ended or multiplayer games (2011).

Depending on the position taken in this debate, then, the interpreted subject matter of the game may be finite or socially constructed – a closed or open system of semiosis. It would seem that a proceduralist approach (if any scholar would fully identify with this school of reasoning as represented by Sicart) diminishes the signification of the playing subject, assuming instead a deconstructing interpreting subject that almost directly accesses the interpreted subject or content of the game as a readable object. The playing-subject of proceduralism is, then, not so much a 'speaking subject' as that function is almost completely subsumed by auctorial instance presently offering meaning for the playing-subject to simply access and understand.

Based on the above, I recognize the player-subject as syntactically split between the *I* of the interpreting subject, behind the computer or the interface, which constrains the possible significations of a text and informs the playing subject based on knowledge of ludic conventions. The playing subject is the implicit *I* that produces the signs of an ergodic text together with the speaking subject of the auctorial instance – as the game's principal organizer of its possible world – navigating the game-as-structure and present *through* the played subject. The played (interpreted) subject is the represented subject, the 'skin-subject' in Sicart: the objective avatar through which the playing subject is present. Yet the avatar in itself is a character, a represented object to be interpreted.

This split subject offers a more complete idea of the subjecthood related to digital game-play than Sicart's multi-subject. It is a split subject whose various subjectivities are translated through a phenomenological idea of presence: the interpreting subject behind the computer assumes the game-specific perception of the playing-subject, delimited by the affordances and constraints offered by specific media expressions. The playing-subject is, in turn, diegetically present through control over the played subject, the represented fictional avatar. This fictional avatar is controlled via specific configurations (first-person, dual-locus, third-person and so on) that allow more or less distantiated presence. Below, I shall untangle these separately in the case of *Spec Ops: the Line*'s specific configuration of subjects. As I will argue, the game structurally frustrates attempts to unify these subjects, instead enstranging them from each other.

3.3. ME/PLAYING/WALKER

The narrator of *The Stanley Parable* was shocked upon learning that the player – the interpreting subject controlling the played subject as a playing subject – is a 'real person:' someone behind a computer, entirely distinct from the character Stanley. I recognized, there, a fundamental tension between the playing subject and the played subject experienced as different entities: I am merely controlling Stanley while I am playing the game. *Spec Ops: the Line* engages with this same paradox by presenting the player with a strong, identifiable lead character, enstranging the playing from the

played subject; in turn confronting the interpreting subject with their compliance with ludic conventions.

I will argue, below, that *Spec Ops the Line* depends on a sufficiently literate interpreting subject, while demanding (through its constraints and affordances) the playing subject to follow the ideological genre conventions of the third person shooter. A ludonarrative dissonance is created by demanding the playing subject to kill for selfish reasons and to use unethical means of military intervention, while the game's played subject reflects on the ludic actions of the playing subject. While the playing subject follows the orders of its ludic structure, a schizophrenic situation is created: the interpreting subject is enstranged from the actions on the screen, inciting criticism or the desire to quit the ludic contract.

Yager Development's *Spec Ops: the Line* (2012) is, ostensibly, the most generic shooter imaginable. Everything about it is set up to conform to the conventions of block-buster shooting games: its cinematic opening scene *in medias res* (a helicopter dog fight over a ruined Dubai); its semi-first person configuration (oscillating between point-of-view and over-the-shoulder shooting as in blockbusters *Gears of War* [Epic Games, 2006] and *Uncharted*); its setting of American foreign military intervention (as in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* [Infinity Ward, 2009]; *America's Army*); even its main character's voice actor Nolan North (as in the *Uncharted* series, *Assassin's Creed* series and many games in the *Call of Duty* series). As one blogger has pointedly stated: "Spec Ops occurs in the ruins of Dubai. There is a desert. There are people to shoot. So anybody who has played an FPS should feel right at home" (Calhoun, 2014).

Thus, the role is perfectly familiar to the reasonably experienced player: they play Cpt. Martin Walker who sets out to rescue Col. John Konrad in a narrative similar to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899): Konrad has defected and set up an autonomous anarchic commune amidst an orientalised, fearsome Dubai swept by sandstorms. Yet, as the game progresses, its played subject problematizes the straightforward discourse of American exceptionalism and military glorification of many blockbuster series such as *Gears of War* or *Call of Duty* – in part through its glaring allusions to *Heart of Darkness*[35] and ubiquity of Vietnam era protest music.[36] That is not to say that there are not players who simply ignore its glaring allusions. For each reviewer, commenter or friend that lauds the game's subversion of convention there is a commenter or friend that "will play the game as a generic third-person shooter and take away little more than that" (Keogh, 2012, 4). As game scholar Brendan Keogh notes, he spent time repeatedly watching a YouTube video series to check his references: "the

[35] For the connection to Heart of Darkness and its cinematic adaptation *Apocalypse Now* (1979) see Payne (2014); Hamilton (2012); Brendan Keogh's book-length close-reading of the game (2012) or Lejacq (2012), in which the developers confirm their intention. For a concise overview of "*Spec Ops: The Line*'s Conventional Subversion of the Military Shooter" see Keogh (2013).

[36] I noted, among others, Jimi Hendrix, (diegetic instances of) Deep Purple and Martha and the Vandellas as well as present-day protest music including the Black Angels.

player that produced these videos spent much of the time trash-talking the NPCs and revelling in the violence with hardly a moment's reflection" (ibid.). Important as this is to note, it is also perhaps all the more reason to stress the role of individual interpretation separate from the actions performed in play.

The formal game design choice I will focus on is explicitly a manifestation of the distinction between the interpreting, playing and played subjects. At one pivotal moment in the game, the played subject Martin Walker is confronted with numerous defected American soldiers. Walker is unambiguously a played subject here, acting, speaking and deciding regardless of any input: our presence during this cut scene is minimized to a disembodied presence through the visual narrator (i.e. in a third-person configuration: a cinematic camera gazes upon an autonomous avatar). He, Walker, is here grammatically a third person. Conveniently, the game provides a solution to the uneven battle in the form of a mortar carrying white phosphorous bombs. One of Walker's team mates protests, but Walker insists that there is no choice, which, indeed, the game's rule-set enforces. That is to say, after regaining control the playing subject has no choice but to use white phosphorus as the only way to progress in the game, despite the chemical's unclear legal and ethical status (MacLeod and Rogers, 2007) and recent controversial uses by the United States Army (Spinner et al., 2004).

While a playing subject exists within the lusory contract that demands the player progress by using the chemical weapon, the game does something interesting to enstrange the interpreting subject from the playing subject. Firing the mortar bombs is done by first shooting a camera up in the air with a parachute, and then aiming the mortar strikes through a screen relaying the camera's view. As the player does so, the game repeats one of its recurring tropes: the player sees Walker's reflection and – in turn – their own reflection as an interpreting subject on the TV screen displaying the game.

This uncovering of the split nature of the player is a schizophrenic moment to be understood as an 'enstrangement' from the actions and convictions of the playing and played subject, or "one could just as well say: to *make them strange* [*verfremden*]" (Benjamin, 1939, 18, original emphasis). As explained in the Introduction, I choose the term enstrangement as a translation of *Verfremdung*, here, because of the relation of Brecht's term to the Russian Formalists' *ostranenie*. Again, the function of enstrangement is that one can be made re-aware of (cognitively) familiar circumstances and objects by presenting them in a new (or 'strange') fashion (Shklovsky, 1929, 6). Hence, a convention so familiar so as to appear natural may be enstranged to draw attention to it – such as the social convention of, say, the American working class to labour for minimum wages without guarantee of health care and little social security; or Muslim women being subordinate to the will of their husbands and male kin. Or the shooter's genre convention of ruthlessly brutal American foreign intervention against a stateless terrorist other.

In this moment the game presents a doubly enstranged experience. It reminds the interpreting subject of their otherness to the played subject: the fact that they are controlling an avatar with a specific background story, visual representation and goals. *And* it reminds the interpreting subject of

their otherness to the playing subject: that the choices taken are finite and pre-programmed according to the developer as co-speaking subject. Both of these, I argue, are taken for granted in moment-to-moment digital play. Such an astonishment – particularly within the concatenation of *Spec Ops*' more subtle enstrangements from violent games' conventions – may serve to remind the player of the material reality of these situations. These more subtle enstrangements aim to remind the player similarly of his split subjectivity: literal reflections, requests by other characters to quit the game, the loading screen asking 'you' how many soldiers you have killed.

In a complete formulation: by disrupting the identification of *Spec Ops*' stable embodied presence, the effect of enstrangement allows the interpreting subject of the player to distantiate itself in a critical attitude that allows a recognition of the depicted rule-governed activities of the playing subject under the ludic contract. More colloquially, in my case I was reminded that I had effortlessly identified with Cpt. Walker – certainly not the first Western soldier-avatar that I had controlled in the process of killing thousands of stateless (or even outer-space alien) terrorist actors. I had suspended the split between myself behind the computer, my actions within the game and the character whose role I was partly enacting (Figure 9). By disrupting my identification – showing both the otherness of my avatar and my own act of playing – the game reminded me of this split, the quasi-natural conventional nature of the situation and its likeness to white phosphorus attacks such as those in Fallujah.

As Brendan Keogh notes in his excellent close-reading of *Spec Ops*, "there is a loading screen tip towards the end of the game, when Walker's cognitive dissonance is nearing its most extreme" (2012, 3): "to kill for yourself is murder, to kill for your government is heroic, to kill for entertainment is harmless" (Yager Development, 2012). Here, Walker turns out to kill for himself: Konrad turns out to be a figment, the orders were long revoked. The playing subject, however, kills for the government of the game, conducted as a subject to act under the ludic contract. The interpreting player, finally, kills for entertainment.

Interpreting subject	**Playing subject**	**Played subject**
"Interpreting subject" (v. Alphen)	"Speaking subject" (v. Alphen)	"Interpreted subject" (v. Alphen)
Deconstructive, ludoliterate	Created in a power structure under a ludic contract	Fictional, represented content of the game
(e.g.) Lars de Wildt	Dual-locus configuration	Cpt. Martin Walker

Figure 9. The Player Subject: interpreting, playing, played

3.4. KILLING FOR ENTERTAINMENT

How harmless is it to kill for entertainment? The ideology proposed by *Spec Ops*' stylized simulation demands a playing subject that kills by demand, while criticizing this demand for the interpreting player. In the final section of this chapter, I will adopt the function of enstrangement in Bertolt Brecht's major pedagogy to argue that *Spec Ops* destabilization of the unity of players' subjecthood frustrates identification.

I will first introduce Brecht's project as a 'new' type of theatre, focusing specifically on Brecht's *Lehrstücke* – didactical plays that are a type of participatory theatre. Second, I will relate the disruption of actor-audiences' identification with their enacted roles to the critical potential therein. Finally, I will reconnect this spect-actorial enstrangement to digital game-play by the example of *Spec Ops*.

Bertolt Brecht is well-known as an influential proponent of the epic theatre – along with such contemporaries as Max Reinhardt and Erwin Piscator (Gray 1961, 61). Epic theatre can be understood as a type of dialectical theatre in a Marxist sense – i.e. that the interaction or even intermingling between actors and audiences leads to a critical questioning of the material conditions presented in the play. Brecht's friend and accompanying theorist Walter Benjamin identifies "the general educational approach of Marxism [as one] determined by the dialectic at work between the attitude of teaching and that of learning," which in the practice of epic theatre translates to "the constant dialectic between the action which is shown on the stage and the attitude of showing an action on the stage" (1966, 11). Evidently, then, Brecht and others try to teach the audience something, principally their "capacity for action" (Brecht, 1964, 37), specifically on such topics as "oil, inflation, war, social struggles, the family, religion, wheat, the meat market" and so on (71).

Importantly, this dialectical nature of the theatre is made possible by a specific type of engagement with the play: it necessitates a certain critical distance. That is to say, the audience cannot blindly identify or empathize with a protagonist, but must remain critically distant. Instead of "identifying itself with the hero," Benjamin argues, the audience of epic theatre "is called upon to learn to be astonished at the circumstances within which he has his being" (1939, 19). It is this astonishment (*Staunen*) that is the basis for understanding that one can change social conditions, that other worlds are indeed possible. Elsewhere, Benjamin identifies the distance created as not merely "detrimental to illusion" but "meant to make the audience adopt a critical attitude, to make it think" (1938, 38).

This disidentification or erasure of empathy I have above termed 'enstrangement:' in the case of *Spec Ops*, I indicated an enstrangement – a making strange or unfamiliar – from the genre convention of ruthlessly brutal American foreign intervention against a stateless terrorist other. Throughout Brecht's oeuvre, techniques of breaking the fourth wall and a 'radical separation of the elements' (*Trennung der Elemente*) serve to enstrange the audience from the play by stressing the artificiality of it. These techniques are part of Brecht's minor pedagogy: a "means of empowering the [passive]

audience in its engagement with conventional bourgeois theatre repertoire" (Calico, 2008, 141). Rather than a comparison of Brecht's minor pedagogy to digital games,[37] I am more interested in his major pedagogy as presented through his *Lehrstücke*. As opposed to minor pedagogy's traditionally passive audience, major pedagogy is an "instigation of literal political activism via the theater event" that "transforms the spectator into a spect-actor, a subject with agency that extends well beyond the theater" (ibid.).

I intend to focus on the role of actor-character identification in Brecht's specific genre of major pedagogical theatre: the *Lehrstück*. Constituting a separate genre of Brecht's plays, the *Lehrstücke* are didactic plays intended to learn through acting. I again favour Benjamin's lucid and concise description: whilst the epic theatre is *always* intended "for the actors quite as much as for the spectators," the *Lehrstück* "falls into a category of its own [in that] it facilitates and encourages the interchangeability of actors and audience, audience and actors" (1939, 20). In the case of one play regarding Charles Lindbergh's transatlantic flight, Brecht emphasizes the importance of participation. Whilst "the figure of a public hero in *Der Flug der Lindberghs* might be used to induce the listener at a *concert* to identify himself with the hero," the rewritten version as a *Lehrstück* prevents the listener from "cut[ting] himself off from the masses" (1964, 32, original emphasis). Rather, "the Flier's part must be sung by a *chorus*" in order to "save something of the paedagogical effect," (ibid. original emphasis) which was to criticize the glorification of the event and its hero, instead reflecting on the conditions of the relevant workers (Benjamin, 1939, 20).

A specific example that sheds light on the role of identification in the *Lehrstücke* is *Die Maßnahme* (Brecht, 1930). While it lacks the branching narrative of the dual *Der Jasager/Der Neinsager Lehrstücke* (Brecht 1929; 1930), and has been performed in front of a public, it presents a fundamental enstrangement, not just for the audience but for the actors regarding their roles. As Yasco Horsman notes: "[the] alienation effect is enhanced by the fact that the four comrades take turns playing the young comrade," rotating and re-announcing each role they take up;

> …the roles played on stage are not to be understood as characters with psychological depth; they are merely functions, demonstrations of certain types so that […] the actors do not themselves fall into the trap of identification. (Horsman, 2011, 102-03)

Essentially, the actors are made to be continually enstranged, disidentified from the roles they play. Much in the same way that a player might see their avatars taken over by the actor of a cut-scene,

[37] A wonderfully educative introductory account of which is presented in Lies van Roessel's MA-Thesis *Restaging the Epic* (2008).

losing their presence in third-person configurations. Furthermore, when auctorial instances present players with the disruptive experiences of unnatural forms of presence and of instable 'bodies,' enstrangement is exactly the result. Thus, interpreting subjects are enstranged when game-play reminds them of the uneasy fit or discrepancy between the playing subject of the game and the subjective natural presence of ourselves as interpreters outside of the game.

The critical potential of this discrepancy between an interpreting subject and their playing subject – the person of the actor and their acted role – is that it may allow an enstrangement from familiar situations through an arousal of "astonishment rather than empathy" (Benjamin, 1939, 18). That is to say: by being confronted with familiar things from enstranged perspectives, one's astonishment with them is supposedly renewed. In that way, enstrangement may provoke a critical re-engagement with ideological conventions that are regularly taken for granted as natural.

Concretely, in the case of *Spec Ops*, the thematized reflection enacted by the played character Walker, his team mates and the auctorial narrator of the loading screen enforce a disrupted identification of the interpreting subject with their in-game performance. The effect, as discussed, has a critical potential: it serves to remind the interpreting subject of the unabashedly cruel actions taken for granted as enacted by the power structure of the game's affordances and constraints. Retroactively, I argue that it serves as a means to reflect on previous violent deeds performed by convention, hence without hesitation or critical reflection. Keogh reminds his readers of *Gears of War*'s "cover system evoking the intensity and claustrophobia of an utterly futile war" leading the player to act violently "even as the games laughably ask us to weep for a character's dead wife moments after he trash-talked an enemy while stomping on his brains" (Keogh, 2012, 2). Such performances are demanded in these games: stomping on brains is an affordance that the game offers to most efficiently kill a nearby enemy, while its constraints insist on taking this enemy out in the first place in order to progress.

3.5. CONCLUSION: GAME-PLAY AS *LEHRSTÜCK*

Before I take a step back to re-assess the project of this thesis as a whole, it is helpful to return to the subquestion posed in this chapter. The final question I posed was how the dialectical relationship between the game (as an ideological system) and the player (as a split subject) may provoke a reflection on ideological conventions. The question's formulation already requires the combined insights gained from the first two chapters. In the first chapter, I argued for games as systems: stylized simulations of a possible world; in the second chapter, I argued for players as split subjects within the power structure of those stylized simulations. Players are seemingly bound to the affordances, constraints and desires proposed by those power structures, but only in so far as they decide to play according to that structure.

In this chapter, I schematized the player as indeed, in part, a playing subject following those structures under a ludic contract or "lusory attitude:" the playful attitude to submit to games as rule-

governed activities (Suits, 1987, 35), to 'play along'. Simultaneously, players have knowledge and desires outside of this structure, on the basis of which I argued to recognize an interpreting subject in the player. This interpreting subject, as a ludoliterate interpreter of the game, first of all informs play in that it interprets the presented possible world according to digital game conventions (such as the 'rule of three' for adventure-game end bosses). On the other hand, the interpreting subject is important to acknowledge in order not to fall into an interpellational argument. One can play along with the structure offered by a game, but the player is always more than what he is doing within the game. The 'played' subject, finally, is at once the subject of the game (its presented content, themes and narratives) as well as the controlled character or avatar that is part of that content. While the interpreting subject may inform and witness the playing subject, who is present through the played subject, these are inherently separate. The played subject Captain Martin Walker has a face, a story, a gender and other properties that the other subjects outside of the possible world need not necessarily have.

With this knowledge, I can further refine my answer to the second chapter's research question: the type of ideological subject constructed through digital game-play is:

1. a split subject divided across an *interpreting subject* akin to the deconstructive subjectivity of Raessens or Friedman;
2. who assumes a temporary subjectivity created by the game through a voluntarily assumed *playing subject* shaped by the game as a power structure akin to the interpellated subjectivity of Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter;
3. and a represented subject which is a *played subject* controlled by this playing subject.

I have furthermore embedded these subject positions in the model initially proposed in my first chapter, that of the steps of actualization in game-play. If we consider the virtual to be a potential (in the sense that an acorn is virtually an oak), the played subject of a game – its presented content in full – is a first restriction of virtuality, i.e. its stylized simulation of everything that could be possible within digital games. The actions of the playing subject subsequently actualize this content in game-play, in the way that choosing the left door over the right door in *The Stanley Parable* constitutes a further actualization of content (as in Figure 5). The final interpreted actualization of game-play is done by the interpreting subject, much in the same way as a text may be said to be constituted by its reader. It may be helpful to compare these functions to that of the characters, actors and audience in a theatrical context. A play's script creates the possible world of, say, *Othello* (Shakespeare, 1603), which describes roughly what the characters say with stage directions: their affordances and constraints. Actors accordingly actualize the characters, performing them with their own bodies, adding intonation, facial expression and so on. The audience, finally, actualizes the play into something meaningful: it becomes a story of jealousy or racism or failed religious conversion or any combination of things.

In light of this split subjectivity, I argued that *Spec Ops: the Line* allows the player to enact a double enstrangement between the subjects of play. It does so by creating a ludonarrative dissonance – a difference between what its narrative component relates and what the ludic power structure affords and constrains the player to do. Firstly, it enstranges the playing subject from the played subject by demanding certain actions – killing ruthlessly without question, most notably through the use of white phosphorus – while at the same time indicating the inhumanity of this action. The concrete played subject of Walker, the character controlled by the player, goes insane: what started out as a rescue mission becomes a delusional, selfish and unethical narrative – one driven forward by the playing subject's progression.

Meanwhile, the played subject of the game addresses the dangers of unquestioned loyalty by portraying the means by which it is enacted as cruel. After killing hundreds of soldiers, or walking through a battlefield of half-dead soldiers still gasping for breath, the player will often encounter loading screens with written messages – on a level of the narrator – confronting the interpreting subject with their actions as a playing subject: "How many Americans have you killed today?"

This double enstrangement – of the playing subject to the played subject and the interpreting subject to the playing subject – works because it depends on a knowledge of conventions. Past repeating the conventions of traditional shooter games, however, *Spec Ops* subverts them. The affordances, constraints and desires offered to the playing subject are structurally put into question. In the cynical words of the loading screen, the game asks: "Do you feel like a hero yet"?

That these conventions are otherwise habitually left unquestioned – as in many of the generic titles named above – is what grants *Spec Ops*' reflection a critical potential. By comparison to Brecht's major pedagogy, I argued that the enstrangement of a spect-actor – an audience that actively takes part in a didactic play or *Lehrstück* – may lead to a reflection on the world outside of the play. By frustrating the uncritical identification of a spect-actor with their enacted role, spect-actors – and players alike – are able to re-cognize (to learn or know again) the familiar, ideological conventions within and beyond that instance of the (game-)play.

Hence, an uneasy fit between the playing and played subject (or ludonarrative dissonance); and an uneasy identification between the interpreting and playing subject causes the enstrangement necessary for game-play to challenge ideologies and for the player to reach renewed insights into the material conditions and social relations of lived society. In that way, material conditions and social injustices that are regularly taken for granted as quasi-natural, ideological conventions can appear once again as they are: unfair, unjust or cruel.

4. CONCLUSION

> "Chess is a mere amusement of a very inferior character, which robs the mind of valuable time that might be devoted to nobler acquirements, while at the same time it affords no benefit whatever to the body."
>
> – "Chess-Playing Excitement." *Scientific American* 1.1, 1859.

> "Chess is a game of State, or of the court: the emperor of China played it. Chess pieces are coded; they have an internal nature and intrinsic properties from which their movements, situations and confrontations derive […] Each is like a subject of the statement endowed with a relative power, and these relative powers combine in a subject of enunciation, that is, the chess player or the game's form of interiority."
>
> – Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari (*Thousand Plateaus*, 1987, 352).

It is tempting to either dismiss game-play as trivial amusement of inferior character; or conversely to endow it with an almost metaphysical significance: as codifying the State; as Huizinga's originary force of human culture; or as paradigmatic for ideology. Admittedly, this thesis tends toward the latter position. Yet, my finishing *Cart Life* will have absolutely no impact on poverty in India; my reflections on *Spec Ops* will not affect global war-mongering; and, in truth, this thesis will not change the world.

There are, however, some things that speak for the project of ideology criticism in game studies. As mentioned in my introduction, my project partly came about from the impression that digital games were not only becoming increasingly popular, but also increasingly 'engaged'. By design, I noticed that digital games showed, more and more, the capacity to persuasively be complicit in or critical of ideologies. I will briefly reflect, below, on why I think an analysis of this capacity is important. First, I should return to the initial question that these changes prompted.

How can digital game-play serve to model, propose and reflect on ideologies?

I proposed, first, a concept of ideology as an organization of the world through conventions (laws, language, political systems) that gain quasi-natural status. These conventions are experienced as natural due to the erasure of alternatives, granting the appearance of autonomous choice within these conventions that shapes the ideologically received affordances (what is possible?) constraints (what is impossible?) and desires (what is desirous?) of the subject.

In parallel, I argued that digital games present possible worlds by simulating fictional environments in a stylized, rather than holistic or all-encompassing simulation that is organized by an

(abstract) auctorial instance. These simulations are stylized in that they reduce virtuality by providing a set of affordances, constraints and desires: a game "deliberately suppresses detail to accentuate the broader message that the designer wishes to present" (Crawford, 1984, 9).

The example of *Cart Life* offers a stylized set of affordances, constraints and desires that models the ideological conventions of (neoliberal) laissez-faire economics. Its auctorial actualization presents us with a possible world experienced from the precarious economic position of its played characters; its narrative events – while seldom influencing game-play directly – stress a paranoid relation to economy and control.

As a stylized model of economic conventions, then, *Cart Life* formally *affords* a way of making money through monotonous labour at a low profit, with high difficulty. It *constrains* play by high demands of rent, hunger and addiction. Meanwhile, it implies the playing subject in the *desires* of each played character by forcing them to make emotional choices for them. Although empathy cannot be enforced, it appears a strong driving force for players. This makes sense: played 'simply' as a ludological system – i.e. ignoring its (narrative) aesthetics – it is an utterly unrewarding game.

Game design formally *models* ideologies by presenting conventions that are quasi-natural. A stylized limitation significantly limits the semantic space available. Game-play, through the formal characteristics of the game, is capable of *proposing* a model of a world in a way that is ideological. It does so by simulating organizations of quasi-natural conventions in a here-and-now that is paradigmatic for ideology. They are relatively closed systems of choice shaping affordances, constraints and desires – affording autonomy only in so far as alternatives are recognized and afforded within its possible world.

That is not to say that I would in any way demand for games to include, in their stylization, every other alternative. That argument would entail a prescription for *Spec Ops: the Line* to include pacifist, diplomatic or other options that do not fit its possible world. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize and analyze this restricted autonomy, and indeed the extent to which games are inherently restricted in order to be, I dare to write: fun. Rather than sprawling simulations of unbridled choice, then, games are inherently and inescapably unilateral and biased, organized across generic and aesthetic conventions that limit their simulation.

In this sense, game-play may model or indeed propose ideologies by presenting a stylized simulation of a possible world, with its own quasi-natural conventions; as a result of which the affordances, constraints and desires offered by its world-view are paradoxically limited while choice appears autonomous.

Game-play can additionally be seen as governing the performance of ideological subject positions. To this end, I briefly compared two traditions of game scholarship on the gaming subject:

- an interpellationary model – that assumes an uncritical relationship between the played subject demanded by the game and the identity of the player (as the interpreting subject and the playing subject performing the interpellated role); and
- a deconstructivist model – that assumes a distantiated relationship of a player untangling the implicit rules of a game and deconstructing its assumptions.

Both of these seem to disregard elements of game-play due to their emphasis on a specific type of ideal player. Sicart's concept of the player-subject rather combines the received subjecthood of interpellationary models with the deconstructivist model of subjecthood. His subject is generated by the game as a ludic power structure, on the basis of knowledge inferred on what the player is supposed to do. To reject this power relationship is essentially to deny the lusory attitude or ludic contract.

I argued from there that these power structures produce a split subject. *The Stanley Parable* addresses a precarious connection and certain difference between the playing subject and the played subject. Stanley, while requiring governance (by his boss; or by the player – what is the difference?) is a character apart from the playing subject; apparent through the narrator's varyingly addressing the playing and played subjects separately.

While players may thus be present in the game as a playing subject (through the played subject), this experienced presence exists in a further continuum with the interpreting subject's natural embodied experience outside of the game. In this respect, formal game design elements are capable of affecting the co-incidence of the interpreting, playing and played subjects. The configuration through which I play Stanley is a first-person engagement: my perspective and actions coincide almost perfectly with those of Stanley. This unity is destabilized when the playing subject leaves the body of the played subject Stanley. Alternatively, in the case of dual-locus configurations (e.g. *Spec Ops: the Line*), the playing subject is at once present as a disembodied camera – occasionally taken over by an independent visual narrator – as well as the played subject Walker – occasionally acting and speaking autonomously as played character of the game's narrative script.

While game-play may formally model or propose ideological systems, then, game-play is also capable of performing ideological subjectivities. It can do so by proposing specific subject positions to players; varyingly allowing for a certain amount of difference between the playing, played and interpreting subjects.

As my final chapter set out to explore, this difference may instead be employed to reflect on ideological conventions. *Spec Ops: the Line* does so by carrying out an enstrangement from the initial subject position offered to its playing subject. Although it first takes on the codes and conventions of its genre by hailing the playing subject as a patriotic, unquestioning soldier, it increasingly subverts that convention. While game-play develops, the played subject presents unethical affordances while alternatives are erased through constraint (think: pacifism, 'conventional' warfare, diplomacy). As the delirious state of the played character becomes apparent and his teammates comment on this, the

interpreting subject is lead to question the actions of the playing subject – who is nonetheless bound within a ludic contract to continue his actions as a way of playing along. As such, *Spec Ops'* game-play recognizes at once a played subject, playing subject and interpreting subject:

1. The played subject is all that presented subject matter of the game, notably the played character that is controlled by the player (Sicart's 'skin subject').

That player must be recognized as a subject further split into a playing subject and an interpreting subject:

2. The former consists of those actions and choices afforded by the ludic power structure and necessary for progress in the game; akin to, elsewhere, the interpellated subject.
3. The interpreting subject is a necessarily separate subjectivity of the player distant from their actions within the game – able to inform, and reflect on, the actions performed within the power structure of game-play; akin to the deconstructive player subject.

It is productive to compare *Spec Ops*' frustration of identification between these subjects of game-play to Bertolt Brecht's major pedagogy. Brecht's *Lehrstücke* were aimed at instigating political activism by playing out provocative hypothetical scenarios and relating them to political circumstances outside of the play – rather than identifying passively with traditional theatrical scenarios. In these didactical plays, spect-actors' identification with their roles is disrupted by allowing multiple-choice decisions (e.g. in *Der Jasager/Der Neinsager*) or by rotating the roles enacted (e.g. in *Maßnahme*).

This type of play has a critical potential in that perceived crises or unresolved injustice on-stage may lead to comparisons off-stage. *Spec Ops* stages a similar enstrangement and a similarly unresolved injustice. As the playing subject is demanded to enact ever more cruel and unethical actions, the interpreting subject is asked why. Similar to the example of *Metal Gear Solid 2* in the introduction, games may suddenly ask players to reflect on their play. While continuing the actions of the playing subject is necessary in order to finish the game, game-play may offer critical reflection for interpretation. Why are you using white phosphorus on enemies of unclear status, who pose no necessary treat, while under no specific orders? One answer is that the playing subject is merely following a script.

Another answer is for the interpreting subject to ponder and leave unresolved. The critical potential of the question lies in its unresolved status: it reminds us that these things *are* being done; that white phosphorus is used (*Spec Ops*), that laissez-faire economics systematically frustrate the financial security of precarious labourers (*Cart Life*), that a military-industrial entertainment complex has a keen interest in the consumption of their training tools as entertainment – as suggested by *Metal Gear Solid 2* and as effected by *America's Army* and a host of other games (Nichols, 2010, 42). More importantly, it reminds us that these things are not only being done, but that these are ways in which we organize our world as 'just the way things are'.

It is important to stress that this argument does not depend on a handful of well-chosen case studies. Many games may offer such reflections exactly because of digital games' inherent resemblance to ideological structures. Lucas Pope's *Papers, Please* (2013) generates a playing subject that follows the unquestioned procedural nature of migration laws in order to finish the game – offering a reflection on the naturalized conventions of nationhood. The same designer's *Republia Times* (2012) proposes a playing subjectivity that acts as a news editor under a totalitarian communist regime and later under a rebel, equally totalitarian, uprising – offering a reflection on the stakes involved in filling newspapers with sports, celebrity and weather coverage instead of engaging with hegemony. Molleindustria's *To Build a Better Mousetrap* (2014) encourages the player as a manager of a ruthless corporation to underpay employees; create surplus value; saturate the market with near-identical commodities; alienate workers based on an arbitrary division of labour and suppress unemployed protesters. All of this in a deliberately opaque game setting that leads to a re-interpretation of it: perhaps not to play a corporation is to eliminate economic inequality. In each, the played subject offers political, cultural, economic or ludic conventions to the playing subject, which are subsequently left to criticize for the interpreting subject.

Indeed in many such cases of straightforwardly essayistic games, to negate the ludic contract is to 'get the point'. Full automatization in *To Build a Better Mousetrap* leads to full unemployment, which leads to "insurrection," *one* of the ways of losing the game. Insurrection leads to the deposition of the governing manager and – presumably – Marxist utopia: all the mice dance while innovation and production are taken over by computers. An early example that discourages its own lusory attitude is *September 12th* (Frasca, 2003), which affords the player unlimited missiles to shoot at terrorists in a stereotypical Arabic desert city. Collateral damage is inevitable; and each grieving member of the public turns into a new terrorist. The message is clear: war exasperates conflict, it is better to stop shooting.

In this way, many games turn to contemporary issues to subvert ideological conventions. Before Frasca's *September 12th*, he himself lamented, such 'newsgames' barely existed (2003a, 225-226). Game-play primarily adhered to its generic conventions, just as one *conventionally* assumes the nation to exist; that a nation attacked demands a retaliation; or that an identifiable collective enemy must be found; and so on.

With that, I argue that there is indeed a strong relevance of ideology in contemporary global politics; and that the project of ideology criticism seems, to me, of utmost relevance to digital games. In 2005, politicologist Chantal Mouffe problematized the "common sense" view of the post-political (1). Using the examples of right-wing populism and terrorism, she argued that the partisan-free worldview of late 20th century politics is mistaken: the Political is inherently antagonistic, rather than having achieved a dialogic, global or cosmopolitan democracy "beyond left and right, beyond

hegemony" (2). Since the 1990s, she argued, "new antagonims [*sic*] have emerged which represent challenges that decades of neo-liberal hegemony have made us unable to confront" (119).

Surely we can imagine other ideologies currently in play in the contemporary global political landscape beyond populism and (Islamic) terrorism. Russian, Ugandan, Nigerian and Indian governments are, each in their own way, taking steps to organize a world that punishes homosexuality (Grekov, 2013; Klompenhouwer, 2014; Kamara, 2014; Burke, 2014). Abortion and euthanasia – biopolitical attempts at organizing life and death – are perpetually returning issues regarding political, social, religious and ethical conventions. Economic, political and cultural spheres (of 'soft power') see the (re-)emergence of China as a new global superpower, acting by a "socialist market economy" ideology that is as yet ill-defined (Chan, 2003; Vogel, 2011, 682). Meanwhile, everyday social and linguistic conventions around me reproduce ideologies of gender, sexuality, race and numerous other quasi-natural organizations daily.

Unsurprisingly, I argue that digital games should be central in the inquiries and pre-occupations of contemporary ideology criticism. As I hope to have adequately indicated over the past few pages, digital games are not merely popular, but expressly fit to reproduce or intervene in ideologies. Either as models, proposals or reflections of possible ways of organized worlds.

Much is left to do, of course, on this subject and within its grander imagined project. For one, there is interesting research left to be done into the implications of this on massively multiplayer games. How do digital games' structural similarities to ideology play out in mini-societies of up to hundreds of thousands of players? And how do they play out differently between communities, between patches and between games? Some inspired research has been done on this by Taylor (2006), Kücklich (2009), and Glas (2012). Additionally, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter connect (multiplayer) ideological systems with the game industry as a military-industrial-entertainment complex (2009).

Although I have focused on predominantly single-player experiences with strong narrative elements, I would not expect this argument to clash drastically with such case studies as puzzle games, board games, or social network games – e.g. *Farmville* (Zynga, 2009) or *The Sims Social* (Playfish, 2011) as studied by play scholar Suen de Andrade e Silva (2013). Studies are furthermore called for on such specific ideological loci as gender, sexuality, war propaganda or any other avenue where ideology is crucially at play. Worryingly, ideology is also at play in the distribution and cultural status of the digital game, both within gaming cultures and a broader cultural sphere. Paolo Pedercini of Molleindustria – developers of the abovementioned *To Build a Better Mousetrap* – is critical, for example, about Apple's structural rejection to offer games in their App Store that deal with political subject matter. He argues that "Apple's decision to turn down *Endgame Syria, In A Permanent Save State* and *Phone Story* [are] political acts motivated by a particular ideology," that ideology being the

conviction that "games and applications are not part of culture like books or music," hence not fit to deal with critical or political subject matter (Drew, 2013).[38]

That being said, ideology *is* at play, and it is increasingly being so within the centres and margins of digital game-play. Whether as a tool of Empire or as a voice for the multitude, from the commercial to the independent, games show inherent parallels to ideology and rise as a vehicle for criticism. By enforcing familiar conventions or introducing new, counterhegemonic worldviews, the subject of play becomes a crucial subject for ideology criticism.

[38] *Endgame Syria* (Auroch Digital, 2012) is a game that explores the rebels' perspectives in the war on Syria. *In a Permanent Save State* (Poynter, 2012) is critical of the working conditions involved in phone manufacturing. *Phone Story* (Molleindustria, 2011) similarly addresses the global structural extortion, despair and cruelty that are part of the practices of manufacturing and selling mobile phones.

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